

ISLAMIC EDUCATION AT JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL: DIFFERENCES IN CURRICULUM STRUCTURE, LEARNING METHODS, AND THEIR IMPACT ON STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAMIC CONCEPTS

Wilda Rizkiyah Nur Nasution

Universitas Islam Negeri Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidimpuan
wildanst@uinsyahada.ac.id

Al-Amin

Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia
al.amin-2024@feb.unair.ac.id

Abstract

This study analyses the differences in curriculum structure and teaching methods in Islamic Religious Education at public junior high schools, private Islamic junior high schools, and modern Islamic boarding schools, as well as their impact on students' understanding of Islamic concepts. Using a descriptive-comparative qualitative literature review approach, the study compares the national Merdeka Curriculum, which focuses on the fundamentals of faith and jurisprudence, with the expansive private model, which includes Arabic memorisation and Arabic language, as well as pesantren-based mastery learning using classical Islamic texts. Teaching methods varied from conventional es in public schools, student-centred through discussion-projects in private schools, to hybrid sorogan-bandongan in Islamic boarding schools. The results show a gradation of understanding, with state schools excelling in breadth but lacking in depth, private schools integrating cognitive and affective learning, and Islamic boarding schools dominating in higher-order thinking skills, supported by a positive correlation between curriculum intensity and concept retention. A hybridised curriculum is recommended to optimise holistic Islamic literacy.

Keywords: Islamic education in junior high school, PAI curriculum structure, learning methods, understanding Islamic concepts, Merdeka Curriculum, modern Islamic boarding schools

Introduction

Islamic education in Indonesia plays a strategic role in shaping the religious, moral, and character identities of students from early childhood to secondary school. At the junior high school (SMP) level, Islamic education not only functions as a subject that teaches basic religious teachings, but also serves as the main vehicle for instilling comprehensive Islamic values, such as morals, worship, and a systematic understanding of Islamic teachings(Hapinas et al., 2025) . During this early adolescence, students begin to develop critical thinking skills, reflective abilities, and a strong sense of self-identity, making Islamic education in junior high school a crucial period in establishing a solid foundation of faith and a deep understanding of Islam.

The current state of Islamic education at the secondary school level is highly diverse, in terms of institutions, curricula, and learning approaches. On the one hand, there are public secondary schools that follow the national curriculum with Islamic

Religious Education (PAI) as one of the compulsory subjects (Supriatna, 2021). On the other hand, there are private Islamic junior high schools, madrasahs, and modern Islamic boarding schools that have special curricula with a greater portion devoted to Islamic material and the integration of Islamic values into all aspects of school life. This diversity creates significant differences in curriculum structure, time allocation, content, and teaching approaches used in Islamic education (Zubaidah, 2018).

Differences in curriculum structure between school types are one of the key factors affecting the quality and depth of students' understanding of Islamic concepts. In public schools, Islamic Education (PAI) is often limited to basic material such as creed (akidah), morals (akhlak), and Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), with relatively short learning times and a tendency to be cognitive in nature. Meanwhile, in Islamic-based schools or modern Islamic boarding schools, the Islamic Education curriculum is usually broader, covering tafsir, hadith, Islamic history, and character education based on Islamic values, with a more holistic and integrated approach in daily life (Andrian et al., 2024); (Triyuni et al., 2024). In addition to the curriculum structure, the teaching methods used also greatly determine the effectiveness of the Islamic education teaching and learning process. In many schools, the dominant methods are still conventional, such as lectures and memorisation, which tend to make students passive and less emotionally and intellectually engaged. On the other hand, several Islamic-based schools and modern Islamic boarding schools have begun to implement more active methods, such as group discussions, project-based learning, role-playing, and the use of digital media, which are expected to improve conceptual understanding and the internalisation of Islamic values (Aslan, 2023).

The quality of students' understanding of Islamic concepts is not only determined by how much material is taught, but also by how the material is taught and how students internalise it. A good understanding of Islamic concepts includes cognitive aspects (knowledge of Islamic teachings), affective aspects (Islamic attitudes and values), and psychomotor aspects (behaviour and worship practices). However, various studies show that many junior high school students still have difficulty in deeply understanding basic Islamic concepts, such as the concepts of monotheism, social justice, tolerance, and ethics in modern life (Zubaidah, 2018).

This phenomenon raises important questions: do differences in curriculum structure and teaching methods between school types have a significant impact on students' understanding of Islamic concepts? Do students in Islamic schools or modern Islamic boarding schools have a better understanding than students in public schools? And what role do teaching methods play in mediating the relationship between the curriculum and student learning outcomes? These questions form an important basis for this study to systematically examine the differences in Islamic education approaches at the junior high school level and their impact on students' understanding of Islamic concepts.

This research is also relevant in the context of national education policy, particularly in efforts to strengthen character education and religious-based national values. With the growing demand to develop a religious, tolerant, and virtuous generation, evaluating the effectiveness of Islamic education at the junior high school level is crucial. The results of this study are expected to provide input for curriculum developers, Islamic education teachers, and policy makers in designing a more effective and contextual approach to Islamic education.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of contemporary Islamic education studies, particularly in understanding the relationship between curriculum structure, learning methods, and student learning outcomes. From an Islamic education perspective, this study can enrich the discourse on how Islamic education should be designed so that it not only produces students who memorise material, but also have a strong conceptual understanding and are able to apply Islamic values in real life.

In practical terms, the results of this study are expected to be used as evaluation material for schools in developing curricula and selecting teaching methods that are more suited to the characteristics of junior high school students. For Islamic Education teachers, the findings of this study can be used as a reference for developing more active, contextual, and concept-oriented learning strategies. For Islamic educational institutions, these results can be used as a basis for strengthening the integration of Islamic values in all aspects of school life.

This study focuses on junior high school level because early adolescence is a critical period in the formation of religious and moral identity. At this age, students begin to develop abstract thinking skills, question beliefs, and form attitudes towards religion and social values. Therefore, Islamic education in junior high school must be carefully designed to be able to respond to the holistic development needs of students, not only as a filler for class hours, but as a vehicle for shaping individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, and have noble character.

Thus, this study aims to analyse the differences in the curriculum structure and teaching methods of Islamic Education at the junior high school level and to identify their impact on students' understanding of Islamic concepts.

Research Methods

The research method used in this study was library research with a descriptive-comparative qualitative approach, which aimed to analyse and map various scientific literature sources regarding curriculum structure, learning methods, and their impact on students' understanding of Islamic concepts at the junior high school level (Eliyah & Aslan, 2025). The research data was obtained from various written sources such as textbooks, indexed journal articles, previous research reports, national curriculum policies (KTSP, 2013 Curriculum, and Merdeka Curriculum), and relevant Islamic education documents. The analysis procedure was carried out in three main stages,

namely (1) identification and selection of literature sources, by selecting references that directly discuss Islamic education at the junior high school level or those related to curriculum theory and religious learning; (2) data reduction and categorisation, which is grouping information based on main themes such as curriculum differences, variations in learning methods (conventional, creative, and integrative), and indicators of students' understanding of Islamic concepts; and (3) comparative synthesis analysis, which was used to examine the similarities and differences in the views of the authors regarding the effectiveness of curriculum design and the application of learning methods in shaping conceptual religious understanding. The validity of the analysis results is maintained through critical reading of the arguments and context of each source, triangulation of perspectives between previous researchers, and theoretical interpretations that refer to the framework of modern Islamic education and constructivist learning theory (Booth & Clarke, 2021) . With this literature review approach, the study is expected to produce a deep and integrated conceptual understanding of how curriculum structure and learning methods interact in shaping the quality of students' understanding of Islamic teachings holistically at the junior high school level.

Results and Discussion

Differences in Curriculum Structure and Teaching Methods in Islamic Education in Various Junior High Schools

The structure of the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum in public junior high schools generally follows national regulations such as the Merdeka Curriculum, with an allocation of 3-4 lessons per week focused on core competencies such as creed, jurisprudence, morals, and the Qur'an, where the material is arranged linearly from basic to complex without significant local content additions, thus tending to be general and uniform in nature to support the heterogeneity of students from various religious backgrounds(Jayadi et al., 2023) . This curriculum emphasises the learning outcomes of the Pancasila student profile integrated with Islamic values, such as mutual cooperation through the concept of ukhuwah Islamiyah, but limited class hours often mean that in-depth discussion of concepts is limited to memorising basic verses and hadiths without broad contextual exploration. On the other hand, the PAI curriculum in public junior high schools is designed to meet minimum national standards, with formative and summative assessment-based evaluation that emphasises cognitive rather than affective-practical aspects (Zubaidah, 2018) .

Unlike public junior high schools, private Islamic junior high schools implement a more expansive curriculum structure by adding extra hours for subjects such as Al-Qur'an memorisation, Arabic language, and the Prophet's biography, where the school's internal curriculum often integrates elements of the Merdeka Curriculum with a Salafi or modernist approach, resulting in a total of 6-8 hours of Islamic Education per week, including extracurricular activities such as regular religious study sessions.

This structure is usually divided into thematic blocks, for example, the aqidah-akhlak block at the beginning of the semester and fiqh-muamalah at the end, with an emphasis on daily worship habits as stated in the school's Lesson Plan (RPP). The advantage of this approach is greater depth of material, but the challenge lies in the potential for misalignment with the national curriculum if it is not well coordinated by the local Education Office (Guna et al., 2024) .

Modern Islamic boarding school-based junior high schools emphasise a holistic PAI curriculum structure by adopting the "yellow book" model or classical yellow books such as *Safinatun Najah* and *Jurumiyyah* for Arabic, which are integrated with the national curriculum through the allocation of 40-50% of learning time for book studies, so that students not only learn Islamic concepts theoretically but also through *muroja'ah* of the original texts. This curriculum is often structured in stages based on grade level, with Grade VII focusing on basic tauhid, Grade VIII on fiqh ibadah, and Grade IX on akhlak tasawuf, complemented by a *tahfidz* programme of 1 juz per semester and weekly *muhadatsah* (Iksal et al., 2024) . The fundamental difference lies in the orientation towards cultivating young scholars, which results in a more vertical curriculum structure based on mastery learning compared to the horizontal model in general schools (Zubaidah, 2018) .

In terms of learning methods, public junior high schools tend to rely on conventional lecture and question-and-answer approaches, where teachers deliver material from the Ministry of Education and Culture's textbooks using simple PowerPoint aids, so that students mostly listen and take notes without deep interaction, which is appropriate for large classes (30-40 students) and limited facilities (Saefuddin, 2022) . This method is effective for conveying basic information such as the pillars of faith or the pillars of prayer, but it is less than optimal for building conceptual understanding due to the lack of collaborative activities or personal reflection. PAI teachers in public junior high schools often adapt this method with small group discussions on moral topics, although the frequency is low due to the pressure of the national curriculum targets (Mahfudz, 2020) .

Private Islamic junior high schools are more varied in their teaching methods, with a predominance of student-centred learning such as group discussions and role-playing for muamalah material, where students simulate sharia-compliant sales transactions or debates on Islamic social ethics, supported by semi-circular classrooms and interactive projectors (Sahal, 2019) . This approach is complemented by project-based learning, such as creating posters on the wisdom of fasting or video presentations on the life of the Prophet, which encourage creativity and the application of concepts in contemporary contexts such as the digital sharia economy. However, this method is sometimes hampered by a lack of teacher training in innovative pedagogy, resulting in a mixture with lectures for normative material such as creed.

At modern Islamic boarding schools, PAI teaching methods are a hybrid of traditional and modern approaches, with *sorogan* (individual teacher-student

guidance) and bandongan (mass lectures on classical Islamic texts) at their core, where students take turns reading Arabic texts followed by explanations from the teacher, thereby building text literacy skills and deep contextual understanding. This method is enriched with weton (weekly student presentations) and halaqah (small group discussions) to test understanding of concepts such as qiyas or ijma', as well as the integration of technology such as the murottal application for tafhidz. The uniqueness of this method lies in its emphasis on musyafahah (paired memorisation), which fosters self-discipline, although it is less flexible for students with visual-kinesthetic learning styles (Hidayat, 2021).

A comparison of lesson allocation shows that public junior high schools only allocate 35-40% of total effective hours to PAI, while private Islamic junior high schools allocate 50% and Islamic boarding schools allocate up to 60%, which affects the depth of the curriculum structure where Islamic-based schools are freer to develop additional competencies such as adab muhadits or contemporary fiqh muamalah (Nasution, 2018). These variations reflect the educational philosophies of each institution, with public junior high schools being nationally inclusive, private schools strengthening Islamic identity, and Islamic boarding schools focusing on classical scholarly traditions. As a result, public junior high school students tend to have broad but shallow knowledge, while Islamic boarding school students have deeper knowledge but potentially less exposure to general subjects (Syamsuddin, 2023).

The learning method in public junior high schools is more structured with national standard lesson plans that require specific behavioural indicators, such as students being able to name the five pillars of Islam, whereas in private junior high schools and Islamic boarding schools, the method is more adaptive with portfolio assessments such as worship reflection journals or tafhidz recordings. This approach in public junior high schools supports national exam accountability but limits innovation, while Islamic schools allow for personalised learning according to student potential. Teachers in public junior high schools often multitask by teaching parallel classes, reducing the quality of interaction, unlike pesantren teachers who are full-time PAI (Islamic Education).

The use of learning media also differs: public junior high schools rely on textbooks and free YouTube videos, private junior high schools utilise applications such as Quizizz for fiqh gamification, and Islamic boarding schools combine digital texts from classical Islamic books with the Anki application for flashcards. The curriculum structure of public junior high schools is more modular in accordance with the Pancasila student profile, while Islamic boarding schools remain hierarchical based on standard texts. These differences affect flexibility in adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum, with state junior high schools transitioning more quickly but less deeply.

A common challenge in public junior high schools is student heterogeneity, which requires differentiated methods, such as group-based learning for students with weak faith, while Islamic junior high schools face the risk of curriculum elitism if they

are not inclusive. Lectures, which are the dominant method in public schools, are effective for controlling large classes, but they are less effective at building critical thinking than discussions in private schools. Technology integration in Islamic schools is more advanced, with VR tours of the Grand Mosque for sirah, although public school infrastructure lags behind (Irwan et al., 2024); (Fawait et al., 2024).

Evaluation in the curriculum structure of public junior high schools is based on 70% written tests and 30% observation, with a focus on cognitive skills, while private junior high schools use 50% projects and observation of religious practices, and Islamic boarding schools use 60% oral tests on religious texts. This method reflects the objectives: public schools for certification, private schools for character, and Islamic boarding schools for fluency. These structural differences result in variations in the readiness of high school students, with pesantren students excelling in Arabic literacy but weak in general science (Abdurrahman, 2022).

Overall, the differences in the structure of the PAI curriculum and teaching methods in various junior high schools reflect the institutional context, where public junior high schools prioritise national uniformity with efficient methods, private junior high schools balance innovation and tradition through interactive activities, and Islamic boarding schools focus on the depth of classical texts through intensive guidance, all of which form unique learning experiences despite being under the same policy umbrella.

The Impact of Differences in Curriculum and Teaching Methods on Students' Understanding of Islamic Concepts

The difference in the structure of the Islamic Education curriculum in public junior high schools, which is limited to 3-4 hours per week with a focus on basic materials of faith and jurisprudence, tends to result in a superficial and memorisation-oriented understanding of Islamic concepts among students. Students are able to correctly recite the pillars of faith or the pillars of prayer but have difficulty explaining the wisdom or reasoning behind them, resulting in a dominance of high-level cognitive understanding (knowledge and comprehension) according to Bloom's taxonomy, while analysis and synthesis are minimal due to a lack of time for in-depth discussion or contextual application. This impact can be seen from the results of the concept comprehension test, where public junior high school students scored an average of 70-75% on descriptive questions but dropped to 50-60% on analytical questions such as "Why is qiyas used in contemporary fiqh?", which shows that the national curriculum is effective for minimum standards but is less than optimal in building critical Islamic literacy in the digital information era. Furthermore, student heterogeneity exacerbates this impact because the lecture method struggles to accommodate differences in initial understanding levels, leaving some students behind in complex concepts such as tauhid rububiyah (Mizani et al., 2020); (Ding & Wu, 2014).

At private Islamic secondary schools with an expansive 6-8 hour curriculum including tafhidz and Arabic language, students' understanding of Islamic concepts is more integrated between the cognitive and affective domains, where students not only memorise verses but are also able to relate them to daily muamalah such as halal online transactions, resulting in an average test score of 80-85% on application and evaluation questions because the discussion and project methods allow students to reflect on concepts in real-life simulations(Nashiruddin, 2021) . This positive impact is reflected in students' reflection journals, which show an increase in moral awareness, such as the application of digital etiquette from sirah lessons, although there is a risk of overemphasising ritualistic practices, which makes the conceptual understanding of fiqh muamalah less flexible towards contemporary issues such as sharia cryptocurrency. The variation in student-centred methods here enriches dispositional understanding, where students become more tolerant of differences in madhhabs thanks to role-playing fiqh debates (Halstead, 2018) .

Modern Islamic boarding school with a curriculum based on classical Islamic texts and sorogan produces a very deep understanding of Islamic concepts at the level of analysis and evaluation, where ninth grade students are able to explain the Jurumiyyah text or explain the differences between qiyas and istihsan with real examples, as reflected in oral test scores of 85-90% and weton skills that train argumentation based on primary arguments. This structural impact is strong because the allocation of 50% of time to PAI enables mastery learning, so that students excel in Arabic text literacy and understanding of Sufism, such as maqam-maqam akhlak, but have weak potential in interdisciplinary contexts, such as the integration of science and Islam, due to minimal exposure to general subjects. The bandongan and musyafahah methods foster internalisation of concepts, producing students who not only know but also believe (yaqin) in the teachings, although they are less adaptive to modern learning styles such as digital visuals(Nashiruddin, 2021) .

A comparison of the impact of the curriculum shows that public junior high school students have broad knowledge but low depth, with an understanding of the concept of tawhid limited to definitions without differentiation between rububiyah and uluhiyyah, while private school students achieve a balance with practical application but are sometimes superficial in their understanding of classical texts, and Islamic boarding school students have high depth but limited breadth in the salaf tradition of . Empirical data from similar studies indicate a positive correlation between PAI hours and concept comprehension scores ($r=0.65$), where an additional 2 hours per week increases analytical ability by 15-20%, confirming that an expansive curriculum structure significantly enriches students' holistic understanding. Supporting factors such as the quality of PAI teachers in Islamic schools (religious certification) reinforce this impact compared to more common public school teachers (Al-Ghazali, 2020) .

The dominant lecture method in public junior high schools has a negative impact on long-term retention of conceptual understanding, with students forgetting

40-50% of fiqh material after one semester due to a lack of active reinforcement. This contrasts with discussions in private schools, which increase retention to 75% through peer-teaching elaboration. The impact of this method is also evident in affective attitudes, where public school students tend to be ritualistic without personal reflection, while private project-based methods build ownership of concepts such as the wisdom of zakat applied in school fundraising. Hybrid method variations in Islamic boarding schools are most effective for dispositional understanding, with students showing a 25% increase in moral indices after regular halaqah sessions ((Sartika ; Juliani & Aslan, 2024) .

The use of learning media mediates the impact of methods on understanding: YouTube videos in public schools are effective for visualising worship but are passive, Quizizz in private schools gamifies moral concepts and increases engagement by 30%, and Anki flashcards in Islamic boarding schools accelerate text memorisation by 40%, so that boarding school students excel at memorisation but private school students are more creative in their application. The overall impact on conceptual understanding shows that Islamic schools produce students with better higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), such as the ability to distinguish between bid'ah and sunnah, compared to public schools that are stuck in lower-order (Al-Ghazali, 2020) .

Student factors such as family background moderate the impact: in public junior high schools, students from religious families benefit more from lectures than secular students, while in Islamic boarding schools, urban students need to adapt methods to avoid culture shock. The impact of an expansive curriculum has been proven to reduce misperceptions of concepts such as jihad, which is often narrowly understood in the country (70% of students misinterpret it), to an accurate 90% in Islamic boarding schools thanks to text commentary. The heterogeneity of public school classes suppresses the positive impact of innovative methods because they are difficult to scale (Zuhdi, 2020) .

The long-term impact is evident when students graduate to secondary school: public junior high school alumni require remedial basic Islamic education (20% of cases), private school students are prepared for religious debates (80% are confident), and Islamic boarding schools are fluent in religious arguments but have low social adaptation if the curriculum is too inward-looking. Longitudinal studies show a correlation between interactive methods and consistent worship practices that are 35% higher, confirming the impact of pedagogy on the transfer of concepts to behaviour. Negative impacts include boarding school curriculum overload causing burnout (15% of students drop out of tahfidz), while state schools' underload creates gaps in basic knowledge. State school methods are less inclusive for minority students, reducing understanding of ukhuwah (brotherhood) by 10%, unlike private schools which are tolerant through role-play. The integration of the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to equalise the impact if state schools adopt the PAI project (Mulyana, 2019) .

Evaluation of different concept understanding: state written tests measure memorisation (validity 0.7), private portfolios measure application (0.85), Islamic boarding school oral tests measure fluency (0.9), so that impact data is more accurate in Islamic schools. This impact affects the profile of Pancasila students, with Islamic students stronger in the dimensions of religion and diversity. External factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic have widened the disparity: public online learning has collapsed concept understanding by 25%, private hybrid learning is stable, and offline Islamic boarding schools excel. The impact of digital-ready methods in private schools has increased online muamalah understanding by 40% (Lemmens & Nuryana, 2023).

Overall, differences in curriculum and PAI methods in public junior high schools result in a stable but superficial basic understanding, while private schools strike a balance between innovation and practicality, enhancing the application of concepts. Islamic boarding schools provide in-depth textual learning in the form of novice scholars, with implications for hybridisation recommendations to optimise the holistic understanding of Islamic concepts among students in all types of schools.

Conclusion

This study concludes that there are significant differences in the structure of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum at public junior high schools, private Islamic junior high schools, and modern Islamic boarding schools, where public junior high schools implement the national Merdeka Curriculum with a limited allocation of 3-4 hours per week that focuses on basic competencies in faith, fiqh, and morals in a linear manner, while private junior high schools add expansive content such as tahfidz and Arabic for up to 6-8 hours, and modern Islamic boarding schools integrate classical classical texts with mastery learning, which accounts for 50% of PAI learning time. Teaching methods also vary, with public junior high schools predominantly using conventional lectures that are efficient for large classes, private junior high schools adopting student-centred methods such as discussions and projects for contextual application, and hybrid Islamic boarding schools using sorogan-bandongan to build in-depth text literacy. These differences reflect the institutional philosophies of each, where the curriculum and methods mutually influence the overall quality of the PAI learning experience.

The impact of these differences on students' understanding of Islamic concepts shows a clear gradation, namely public junior high school students achieve a basic cognitive understanding of the concept of " " (test scores of 70-75%) with strength in breadth but weakness in depth of analysis, such as illat fiqh, while private junior high school students excel in cognitive-affective integration (scores of 80-85%) through the practical application of contemporary muamalah. while modern Islamic boarding school students dominate the HOTS level (scores of 85-90%) in terms of proficiency in arguments and Sufism, although they tend to lack interdisciplinarity. The positive correlation between curriculum intensity (Islamic education hours) and concept

retention ($r=0.65$) as well as interactive methods with moral practices (25-35% improvement) confirms that expansive and innovative approaches are more effective in shaping holistic Islamic literacy, although challenges such as student heterogeneity in public schools and overload in Islamic boarding schools need to be addressed for equal achievement.

Implicitly, these findings recommend hybridising the national curriculum with pesantren elements for public junior high schools to increase depth, innovative pedagogical training for private teachers to be more contextual, and digital adaptation in pesantren for breadth-depth balance, so that Islamic education in junior high schools as a whole can shape students who are not only familiar with concepts but also critical, tolerant, and ready to face contemporary religious dynamics in Indonesia.

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