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Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum to Enhance Students' Creativity at Vocational High School

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Abstract

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum was introduced to provide greater flexibility in the learning process, with a strong emphasis on fostering students' creativity. This study aims to explore how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum enhances students' creativity in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti, Pasaman, and to provide recommendations for further improvement.

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The key informants include PAI teachers and Grade XI TP students. The findings reveal that well-structured planning, systematic implementation using Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Team-Based Learning (TBL), as well as continuous evaluation, successfully enhance students' creativity in PAI learning. The use of innovative learning media also contributes significantly to increasing student participation and engagement.

This study provides important insights into Islamic Religious Education at the vocational level, offering recommendations for improving teacher training, utilizing more varied instructional media, and implementing more integrated evaluation systems to further support the development of students' creativity.

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INTRODUCTION

The curriculum in Indonesia has undergone significant changes in an effort to improve the quality of education. Since the introduction of the 2013 Curriculum (K13), the main focus of learning has shifted toward developing students' competencies, which include attitudes, knowledge, and skills. However, despite being implemented for several years, K13 is considered not yet fully able to accommodate learning needs that are relevant to current developments and students' characteristics. Therefore, the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) Curriculum emerges as a new solution to provide more flexible learning based on students' individual needs and potential. The concept of *Merdeka Belajar* emphasizes freedom for teachers and students to manage the learning process through a more open, creative, and enjoyable approach (Kemendikbud, 2020). In this framework, teachers are given the autonomy to determine learning materials and methods according to students' characteristics, while also providing space for students to express creativity and develop their potential optimally.

The implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum is expected to address educational challenges in the digital era and to produce a generation that is more creative, innovative, and critical. Its implementation requires careful preparation, including teacher training, the development of more contextual learning tools, and the use of appropriate learning media (Hartoyo & Rahmadayanti, 2022). One of the main focuses of this curriculum is enhancing students' creativity, particularly in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). By encouraging students to actively participate in learning processes and utilizing interactive methods, they are expected to develop critical thinking skills and creative problem-solving abilities in daily life (Rahayu, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to explore how the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum enhances students' learning creativity in PAI at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti, particularly in relation to planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning.

Creativity is an essential ability in education, as it is not only related to knowledge mastery but also to critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Creativity plays a vital role in developing students' potential, addressing real-life challenges, and preparing them for the dynamics of a rapidly changing world. The emphasis on creativity has become increasingly important along with the rapid development of technology and information, where students are expected not only to be recipients of information but also producers of ideas and innovations. Therefore, education must be able to develop students' creativity so that they can think more openly, innovatively, and independently in solving problems. A curriculum that emphasizes creativity can motivate students to develop new ideas, think critically, and collaborate in solving various problems. One effort to achieve this is through the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, which provides greater space for students to explore their interests and talents in a more flexible and enjoyable way (Rahayu, 2023).

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum aims to create an education system that not only focuses on knowledge transfer but also on the development of students' character, competencies, and creativity. In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is expected not only to teach moral and spiritual values but also to encourage students to develop critical, creative, and innovative thinking skills in solving problems related to their daily lives. For instance, in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, teachers do not merely act as knowledge transmitters but as facilitators who provide opportunities for students to actively participate in the learning process.

Through a more student-centered approach, learners are expected to explore their creativity in various forms such as discussions, projects, and experiments. By integrating the *Pancasila Student Profile*, which includes values such as critical thinking, creativity, and independence, students are expected to apply these values in real life and adapt to ongoing changes. The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum also allows teachers to adjust learning methods based on students' characteristics and needs, which directly contributes to enhancing students' creativity (Hartoyo & Rahmadayanti, 2022).

Previous studies have shown that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum can improve creativity in various learning contexts. According to Hartoyo and Rahmadayanti (2022), its implementation in elementary schools demonstrates that freedom in selecting learning methods and approaches increases students' active participation and encourages creative and critical thinking. In addition, Rahayu (2023) explains that integrating the *Pancasila Student Profile*, which includes critical thinking, creativity, and independence, enables students to apply these values in learning, including in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). At SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti, this is relevant to efforts to enhance students' creativity in PAI through student-centered learning methods that provide space for students to express creativity and solve problems independently. However, although these findings show positive results at the elementary level, limited research has specifically examined the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education at vocational high schools (SMK), particularly in relation to creativity development in religious learning.

Previous research, such as that conducted by Prasetya (2023), highlights the importance of formative assessment in supporting students' creativity development. However, the lack of in-depth studies on how such assessments are implemented in PAI at the SMK level makes this research gap highly relevant. Although much literature has discussed the success of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in enhancing creativity, a clear gap remains in understanding how it is practically implemented in PAI at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti. Specifically, limited studies have explored how lesson planning, implementation, and evaluation based on Merdeka Belajar principles can concretely enhance students' creativity in this context. Therefore, this study focuses on filling this gap by examining in depth how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is implemented at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti to enhance creativity in PAI learning, and by contributing to the development of Islamic education curricula at the vocational level that are more relevant to current educational demands and student characteristics.

The main objective of this study is to explore how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum enhances students' creativity in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti, Pasaman. As discussed previously, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum provides flexibility for both teachers and students to determine learning methods that align with their individual characteristics and potentials. This study aims to identify in depth how planning, implementation, and evaluation within this curriculum contribute to fostering students' creativity, particularly in the context of PAI learning.

Thus, this research is expected to provide a clearer understanding of how educational policies based on freedom and creativity can be effectively implemented in religious education, which is often challenged to remain relevant to contemporary developments and students' needs.

The significance of this study is highly relevant to the development of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at the vocational high school level, particularly at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti, Pasaman. This research is expected to contribute practical insights into the implementation of a curriculum that encourages students' creativity in religious learning, and how it can improve the overall quality of education in vocational schools.

In addition, the findings of this study may serve as a reference for other schools that are implementing or planning to adopt the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, especially in PAI subjects, in order to optimize students' potential in creativity and critical thinking. This study also provides insights into the importance of curriculum adaptation to students' characteristics in the digital era, ensuring that education remains contextual, relevant, and dynamic in meeting current educational needs.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research approach, focusing on data collection through observation, interviews, and documentation to provide an in-depth description of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti. The qualitative approach enables the researcher to explore information holistically and in depth, which is essential for analyzing complex educational phenomena (Sugiyono, 2015).

This research was conducted at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti over a period from October to August, allowing sufficient time for comprehensive data collection through direct observation of classroom learning processes. The key informant in this study was the PAI teacher, while supporting informants were Grade XI TP students, who provided perspectives on curriculum implementation and its impact on their learning creativity.

Data were collected through classroom observation, interviews with teachers and students, and documentation, which included teaching modules and learning activity reports (Agustinova, 2015). This approach aligns with the principles of qualitative research, which emphasize understanding context and processes through direct interaction with research subjects (Rahayu, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The profile of SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti shows that the school was established in 1999 under the Harapan Bangsa Foundation. Located in Jorong Sentosa Panti, Panti Subdistrict, Pasaman Regency, SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti is a private educational institution committed to providing quality education. With a B accreditation status and land and buildings owned by the foundation, the school offers vocational competencies in Office Administration, Marketing, and Banking. As part of its efforts to improve educational quality, the school employs teachers who meet the minimum academic qualification of a Bachelor's degree (S-1), with several holding a Master's degree (S-2). This reflects the school's commitment to providing competent and professional educators to support an effective learning process aligned with the demands of the labor market and curriculum development.

The brief history of SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti reflects the strong dedication and vision of its founders, H. Mardan and Hj. Tihajar Hasibuan, who established the school amidst significant challenges. Their motivation to build a better generation through education has become a strong foundation in the school's development. With a vision to produce graduates who are intelligent, independent, faithful, pious, and environmentally conscious, the school is committed to improving the quality of

teachers and educational facilities. Its mission, which includes improving learning facilities, enhancing instructional quality, and developing extracurricular activities such as religious and sports programs, demonstrates a holistic effort to shape students' character.

This vision and mission support the objectives of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, which emphasizes student freedom in developing creativity. It is also relevant to the school's efforts in creating a more dynamic learning environment that focuses on students' character development and creativity enhancement.



Figure 1: Front page of Harapan Bangsa Panti Vocational School

1. Planning of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Enhancing Creativity

The planning of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti demonstrates a serious effort by teachers to align the curriculum with students' needs. In this regard, the development of instructional devices is considered an essential first step to ensure that learning is conducted in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. As part of the planning process, teachers are required to participate in training workshops aimed at deepening their understanding of the curriculum.

Mrs. Refni, the Vice Principal for Curriculum at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti, stated, "In learning planning, every teacher must first attend a special training workshop in designing instructional devices, which are then required to be developed independently or collaboratively."

This training is important to help teachers understand the theories and techniques of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, which ultimately enables them to design more creative and innovative learning experiences for students (Sukardi, 2013).



Figure 2 Interview between researcher and Mrs. Refni S. Pd as Deputy Principal for Curriculum at Harapan Bangsa Panti Vocational School

The importance of this training is also supported by Mrs. Mardiah, a teacher of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti. According to her, before starting the teaching process, teachers are required to prepare an annual program (Prota), semester program (Promes), learning outcomes (CP), learning objective flow (ATP), and teaching modules as instructional guidelines throughout the learning process. This indicates that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at this school is carried out through careful planning based on students' needs. In addition, the development of teaching modules is also aligned with the *Pancasila Student Profile*, which is expected to help teachers connect learning materials with Pancasila values that should be applied in students' daily lives. This is consistent with Rahayu (2023), who states that the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum promotes the integration of character and competencies in the learning process, including in Islamic Religious Education.

However, teachers face challenges in identifying the characteristics and needs of each student, who come from diverse backgrounds, interests, and learning styles. Mrs. Mardiah also stated that the main difficulty in developing teaching modules lies in accommodating differences in students' characteristics and learning motivation, as each student has a different level of willingness to learn. This becomes a significant challenge, considering that one of the objectives of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is to provide students with freedom to develop their creativity. Therefore, the implementation of this curriculum requires more flexible adjustments to students' conditions so that their creativity can develop optimally (Sari, 2019).

Furthermore, the learning materials developed by teachers must refer to the *Pancasila Student Profile*, which includes values such as faith and devotion to God, global diversity, mutual cooperation, critical thinking, and creativity. Mrs. Mardiah added, "The Islamic Religious Education materials taught at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti cover all aspects, including understanding, internalization, and practice of Islamic teachings, with the aim of shaping students into individuals who are faithful, pious, and possess noble character."



Figure 3 Interview between the researcher and Mrs. Mardiah S. Pd. as the Islamic Religious Education subject teacher for class XI TP SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti

By linking learning materials to Pancasila values, it is expected that students can apply these values in their daily lives. This is in line with the findings of Hartoyo and Rahmadayanti (2022), which state that the integration of character values in learning can encourage students to think and act more creatively.

The application of teaching methods and learning strategies in the Independent Curriculum is also very important in creating an environment that supports students' creativity. Mardiah stated that various student-centered learning methods are used, such as discussions, presentations, practice, and project-based learning. In this regard, each method is selected based on students' conditions and interests to ensure that they can participate in learning activities enthusiastically and effectively. These methods are aligned with the principles of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasize the importance of developing students' creativity and critical thinking skills at every stage of learning (Campbell, 2017).

In selecting learning media and resources, SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti pays close attention to the use of innovative and interactive instructional media. Mardiah explained, "We often use the Qur'an and its translation, laptops, LCD projectors, active speakers, Interactive Learning Multimedia (MPI), and other tools." The use of these learning media aims to create a more engaging learning atmosphere, prevent student boredom, and ensure that learning takes place in an enjoyable manner. This shows that the Independent Curriculum does not only emphasize changes in pedagogical approaches but also the use of technology to support a more effective and creative learning process (Agustinus Tanggu Daga, 2021).

Based on the findings above, the planning of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti has been carried out carefully, prioritizing teacher training, the development of flexible learning tools, and the use of media that supports student creativity. This demonstrates the school's commitment to creating learning that is not only content-centered but also focused on developing students' creativity and character in accordance with the principles of the Independent Curriculum.

2. Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Enhancing Students' Creativity

The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti shows a significant change in classroom management aimed at improving students' creativity. One of the most noticeable aspects is the application of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Team-Based Learning (TBL), which focus on group discussions and presentations. Based on an observation conducted on June 2, 2025, these methods allow students to work collaboratively in groups, discuss relevant topics, and present the results of their discussions.

Mardiah, an Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher, explained that in PAI learning, "the methods I frequently use are project-based learning (PjBL) and team-based learning (TBL)" in order to make students more active and engaged in the learning process (Sari, 2019). The use of these two methods facilitates students in developing critical and creative thinking skills, while also increasing their activeness in discussions and presentations.



Figure 4 Learning atmosphere in class XI TP SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti

One of the key aspects of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is providing opportunities for students to collaborate on projects or group tasks, which serve to enhance their creativity. Based on observations, these activities allow students to share ideas and develop creative solutions in solving problems. Shalahuddin, a student participant, stated that group discussions "allow me and my friends to share ideas and improve my understanding of the material." This indicates that the implementation of PjBL and TBL has successfully created a more dynamic learning environment, increased students' motivation, and provided space for them to develop creative ideas (Hartoyo & Rahmadayanti, 2022).

In addition, the use of interactive learning media also plays an important role in creating a fun and engaging learning atmosphere. Mardiah stated that at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti, various media are used, such as LCD projectors, relevant textbooks, and Interactive Learning Multimedia (MPI), to support the learning process (Kurniawan et al., 2020). This is in line with the principles of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, which emphasizes the use of technology to create more engaging learning experiences and reduce classroom boredom. With adequate learning media, students are not only actively involved in the learning process but also feel more enthusiastic and interested in participating in lessons, which in turn enhances their creativity.

Shalahuddin, a Grade XI TP student, expressed that "I am happy with the availability of adequate learning media at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti

because it makes me and my friends more motivated and enthusiastic in participating in learning activities."



Figure 5 Interview between researcher and Shalahuddin, a Grade XI student at Harapan Bangsa Panti

This shows that the media used in the classroom plays an important role in supporting students' creativity. According to Campbell (2017), innovative learning media can create an environment that supports student creativity, accelerate material understanding, and facilitate productive discussion and collaboration in the classroom.

Although the use of learning media and PjBL and TBL methods has been quite effective in improving students' creativity, challenges still exist. Some students still do not pay attention to the results of their peers' discussions, indicating difficulties in maintaining focus and attention during group work. Mardiah explained that one of the obstacles in implementing these methods is the difficulty in bringing together students with highly diverse characteristics. However, despite these challenges, the use of varied media and project-based methods still has a positive impact on improving students' creativity in learning (Endang Sri Rahayu, 2023).

To address these challenges, more effective classroom management is needed, where teachers can focus more on managing time and student interaction during discussions. Kunandar (2013) states that good classroom management can facilitate more focused discussions, increase student participation, and ensure that all students are actively involved. Therefore, in the future, the implementation of project-based methods should be supported by more intensive teacher training in classroom management and student guidance.

Overall, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti has shown positive results in enhancing students' creativity, although challenges such as student diversity still require further attention. With appropriate methods and supportive media, learning can be more effective, produce more creative students, and prepare them to face future challenges.

The evaluation of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti shows that the use of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments has made a significant contribution to students' understanding of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) materials and has also improved their creativity. Diagnostic assessment is conducted before

learning begins to assess students' prior knowledge and to adjust appropriate teaching strategies. This allows teachers to understand students' level of understanding of previous material and design suitable learning approaches, in line with findings by Prasetya (2023).

Formative assessment, implemented during the learning process, enables teachers to continuously monitor student progress. This includes daily assignments, quizzes, and group discussions. This evaluation serves as feedback for both teachers and students, giving students the opportunity to improve their understanding. Observation results show that this method successfully increases student participation in discussions and projects, consistent with the research conducted by Hartoyo & Rahmadayanti (2022).

Summative assessment, conducted at the end of learning, functions as a final evaluation of student achievement. At the end of the semester, students are assessed through written exams and projects to measure their understanding of the material taught. Although summative assessment is important for final evaluation, some students still experience difficulties in achieving it, indicating areas that need improvement in the learning process. According to Rahayu (2023), this suggests that summative assessment should be more varied and adaptive to student needs.

Based on these findings, it is recommended to improve assessment variability by introducing more alternative assessment methods besides written exams, such as project-based assessment and portfolios. This aligns with the need to encourage student creativity and provide them with more opportunities to express their understanding in more practical forms. Mardiah, the PAI teacher, also stated that project-based learning (PjBL) methods and assignments should be more integrated into formative assessment to increase student engagement.

Furthermore, to improve the effectiveness of evaluation in the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, it is important to strengthen reflection between teachers and students during the learning process. Mardiah emphasized the importance of direct feedback after each learning session to understand the difficulties faced by students. This allows teachers to immediately improve their teaching approaches and better adjust methods to students' individual needs, thereby enhancing their creativity and understanding of the material being taught.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at SMK Harapan Bangsa Panti has successfully enhanced students' creativity in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) through a structured and continuous process of planning, implementation, and evaluation. The main findings indicate that well-prepared planning beginning with teacher training, the development of learning tools, and the use of innovative learning media has created opportunities for students to express creativity in understanding PAI materials.

The application of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Team-Based Learning (TBL) in the learning process provides students with opportunities to collaborate, engage in discussions, and present their ideas, which in turn enhances both their creativity and understanding (Hartoyo & Rahmadayanti, 2022).

Ongoing evaluation through diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses and provides necessary feedback for improvement. Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed, including strengthening teacher training to deepen their understanding of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, increasing the use of innovative learning media, and implementing more integrated evaluation systems to monitor and improve student learning outcomes. This approach is expected to better align with students' characteristics and learning needs (Rahayu, 2023).

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