



Kurikulum Merdeka in early childhood Islamic education for character and spirituality

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in early childhood Islamic education, with a particular focus on shaping character and spirituality from an early age. The background of this research is based on the need for an educational model that emphasizes not only cognitive aspects but also the development of strong moral and spiritual values during a child's formative years. The main issue raised is how the Kurikulum Merdeka can be effectively integrated with Islamic education to shape children's character and spirituality. This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a literature review method, to examine literature related to the Kurikulum Merdeka, early childhood Islamic education, and theories of character and spiritual formation. The results of the study indicate that the Kurikulum Merdeka provides significant scope for strengthening Islamic values through a contextual, differentiated, and student-centered learning approach. The integration of Islamic teachings with the Pancasila Student Profile can enhance children's character development, including honesty, empathy, responsibility, and spiritual awareness. This study concludes that the Kurikulum Merdeka can synergize effectively with Islamic education, becoming the right strategy for shaping a young generation that is not only academically intelligent but also has a strong foundation in character and spirituality.

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam pendidikan Islam anak usia dini, khususnya dalam membentuk karakter dan spiritualitas sejak dini. Latar belakang penelitian ini didasarkan pada kebutuhan akan model pendidikan yang tidak hanya menekankan aspek kognitif, tetapi juga pembentukan nilai-nilai moral dan spiritual yang kuat pada masa keemasan anak. Masalah utama yang diangkat adalah bagaimana Kurikulum Merdeka dapat berbaur secara efektif dengan pendidikan Islam agar mampu membentuk karakter dan spiritualitas anak. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi pustaka, yang mengkaji literatur terkait Kurikulum Merdeka, pendidikan Islam anak usia dini, serta teori pembentukan karakter dan spiritualitas. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka memberikan ruang besar bagi penguatan nilai-nilai keislaman melalui pendekatan pembelajaran yang kontekstual, diferensiatif, dan terpusat pada murid. Integrasi nilai-nilai ajaran Islam dengan Profil Pelajar Pancasila dapat memperkuat pembentukan karakter anak seperti kejujuran, empati, tanggung jawab, dan kesadaran spiritual. Simpulan dari penelitian ini adalah bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka dapat bersinergi secara efektif dengan pendidikan Islam, dan menjadi strategi yang tepat dalam membentuk generasi muda yang tidak hanya cerdas secara akademik, tetapi juga memiliki landasan karakter dan spiritualitas yang kuat.

Kata Kunci: karakter; Kurikulum Merdeka; PAUD; pendidikan anak usia dini; spiritual

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INTRODUCTION

The Kurikulum Merdeka is expected to provide an effective foundation for integrating profound Islamic values into children's personal and social development, thereby creating a generation that is not only academically intelligent but also virtuous (Salsabila et al., 2022). Islamic education refers explicitly to the holistic development of both the physical and spiritual aspects of individuals, guided by the principles of Islamic teachings. Islamic education occupies a significant position within the national education system, contributing to its overall objectives. Through education, it is hoped that the character and spirituality of students in educational institutions can be built. Early Childhood Education (*Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini* or PAUD) is the most crucial stage in a child's development of character and spirituality. Early childhood is often referred to as the golden age, a period during which rapid and relatively permanent moral, emotional, social, and spiritual development occurs (Aziz et al., 2025).

In this context, Islamic education at the PAUD level serves not only as an introduction to basic academic skills but also as a primary foundation for developing a personality rooted in Islamic values (Aziz et al., 2025). These values include honesty, responsibility, compassion, simplicity, and an awareness of the relationship between humans and God. Therefore, Islamic education at an early age necessitates a holistic and contextual approach that encompasses all aspects of a child's development. The Kurikulum Merdeka, introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, provides a more flexible and contextual learning environment, based on students' needs and interests. This curriculum emphasizes child-centered learning by encouraging exploratory activities, character building through the Pancasila Student Profile Project, and a thematic approach that integrates students' real-life experiences (Alim et al., 2022). In the context of Islamic PAUD, the Kurikulum Merdeka opens up opportunities to integrate Islamic values more meaningfully into daily learning.

However, the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in Islamic PAUD institutions has not fully reflected the curriculum's ideals, particularly in terms of character development and early childhood spirituality. Problems emerging in the field indicate that not all Islamic PAUD teachers deeply understand the concept of the Kurikulum Merdeka, especially in linking it to Islamic education. Many Islamic PAUD institutions still implement conventional learning, oriented toward memorization and symbolic religious routines, without efforts to reflectively internalize meaning. This clearly contradicts the spirit of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which demands the transfer of values that engage children's holistic consciousness. Furthermore, gaps remain in teacher resources, training, and the development of teaching materials that align with the Islamic values-based approach of the Kurikulum Merdeka. Another challenge is how teachers can translate Islamic principles, such as monotheism, morality, and worship, into learning activities that are enjoyable, relevant, and suitable for the psychological development of early childhood. Therefore, effective training is essential to provide a deep conceptual understanding of the Kurikulum Merdeka and the practical skills needed for its implementation in the classroom (Lestari, 2024).

Several previous studies have discussed the integration of Islamic values in PAUD. However, most have focused on content or teaching materials, rather than on the curriculum approach or implementation model. For example, research has found that the integration of Kurikulum Merdeka and Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam or PAI) has been able to shape students' character according to the dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly in the aspects of Faith, Devotion to God Almighty, and Noble Morals (Ningsih et al., 2025). Another study has shown that the Kurikulum Merdeka presents a significant opportunity to enhance the standards of Islamic religious education in the early stages of child development (Achmad, 2024). Research has found that the successful implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum hinges on the efforts of teachers and students to shift their mindsets, becoming open to change, thereby allowing the curriculum to be implemented optimally. The Independent Learning Curriculum will shape students' character to be more creative, independent, responsible, able to work together, think critically, and communicative (Ashfarina et al., 2023).

The solution offered in this study is to comprehensively examine and describe the implementation practices of the Kurikulum Merdeka in Islamic PAUD institutions, particularly in the context of character development and children's spirituality. This research focuses not only on how the curriculum is designed in writing, but also on actual classroom practices—including how teachers design activities, guide children, and instill Islamic values in daily activities. The approach used in this study is qualitative, delving deeply into teacher practices, the use of teaching materials, learning strategies, and the dynamics of child interactions. Therefore, this research is expected to make a tangible contribution to the development of an Islamic PAUD curriculum that is more contextual, relevant to the times, and remains rooted in profound Islamic values.

This study also aims to explore how teachers translate the principles of the Kurikulum Merdeka into learning activities that incorporate Islamic spiritual and character values, such as fostering love for Allah and the Prophet, promoting social awareness, and instilling independence and honesty from an early age. Furthermore, this study aims to identify the obstacles that teachers face in this integration process, including difficulties with understanding the curriculum, the availability of teaching materials, and institutional support. This research will also highlight various best practices that can be replicated or used as references by other Islamic PAUD institutions in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka in an Islamic and meaningful manner.

The objectives of this study are to: 1) Describe the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in early childhood Islamic education in the context of character and spirituality learning; 2) Identify strategies used by teachers in shaping children's character and spirituality through Islamic-based learning; and 3) Identify obstacles and supporting factors that influence the effectiveness of the Kurikulum Merdeka implementation in Islamic PAUD institutions. It is hoped that the results of this study can contribute to the development of more integrative and meaningful PAUD learning practices, as well as assist the government and educational institutions in developing training and curriculum policies that are contextual to Islamic values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kurikulum Merdeka

The Kurikulum Merdeka was launched in 2022 as a response to the need for more flexible and student-centered learning. The material was intentionally streamlined to allow teachers space to deepen concepts, emphasize practice, and foster character through the Pancasila Student Profile project (Yufarika et al., 2025). This model offers teachers the flexibility to choose learning methods that best suit the classroom environment and local conditions, thereby making learning more relevant to students. The curriculum structure comprises two main components: flexible intracurricular activities and thematic projects spanning multiple subjects. Learning phases are divided into two or three years, rather than by grade, to more seamlessly monitor children's competency development. Schools utilize the *Merdeka Mengajar* platform to share teaching modules, while teachers are encouraged to adapt content to local contexts, including local culture and students' specific needs (Nijma & Asnatasia, 2025). The Kurikulum Merdeka for early childhood is designed to provide greater freedom for educators and students in the learning process.

This approach emphasizes the holistic development of children's potential, focusing not only on cognitive aspects but also on social, emotional, and spiritual aspects (Nijma & Asnatasia, 2025). This curriculum delivers learning in a fun and developmentally appropriate way, enabling children to learn through play, interaction, and exploration of their surroundings. This allows children to be more actively involved in the learning process, developing their creativity and critical thinking skills from an early age. The Kurikulum Merdeka also provides teachers with the flexibility to choose methods and materials that suit children's needs and interests (Aziz & Wati, 2024). This curriculum also supports the integration of moral and character values essential to PAUD. Values such as honesty, empathy, cooperation, and responsibility are taught in the context of everyday life, shaping children into individuals who are not only academically intelligent but also possess a strong character foundation to face life's challenges.

Early Childhood Islamic Education

Early Childhood Islamic Education (Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini or PAUD) is the process of introducing and fostering Islamic values in young children, typically between the ages of 0 and 6 years old. Its primary goal is to instill the foundations of faith, morals, and love for God from an early age through an approach appropriate to the child's developmental stage (Syaputri et al., 2023). Learning is presented in a fun and engaging way, utilizing stories, songs, games, and other creative activities, allowing children to understand Islamic values without coercion naturally. The approach used in PAUD is holistic and integrative, meaning it focuses not only on religious aspects but also encompasses children's cognitive, motor, social, and emotional development.

The material provided includes an introduction to the pillars of faith, the pillars of Islam, daily etiquette, stories of the prophets, and daily prayers (Rosyidi et al., 2022). Teachers act as role models and facilitators, helping children develop Islamic character by providing positive spiritual experiences in a safe and enjoyable learning environment. The role of the family

and the surrounding environment is crucial to the success of Islamic education at an early age (Umar et al., 2021). Children learn primarily through observation and imitation, so the role models of parents and teachers are crucial. Synergy between educational institutions, parents, and the community is key to developing children with noble character, a strong foundation of faith, and the ability to grow into individuals who are beneficial to themselves and their environment.

Building Character and Spirituality in Early Childhood

Building character and spirituality in early childhood is a crucial process that should be initiated early, as it is during this time that the foundations of personality and life values begin to form (Erika, 2023). Early childhood is a highly sensitive developmental stage, so character education, such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and caring, must be taught through concrete examples and enjoyable activities. These values help children develop positive mindsets and attitudes that they will carry into adulthood. Spirituality should also be introduced from an early age, not only through formal religious activities like prayer or learning about God, but also by instilling gratitude, empathy, and an awareness of the Creator.

Children learn about spirituality through everyday experiences, such as engaging with meaningful stories, observing nature, or being encouraged to reflect on the goodness in their lives. A sound spiritual education can help children achieve inner peace and self-awareness, while also fostering healthy relationships with others and their environment (Nuryadi et al., 2024). Parents and teachers play a vital role in shaping a child's character and spiritual development. They serve not only as educators but also as role models for attitudes and behavior (Saragih, 2025). Consistency between what is taught and what is modeled will make it easier for children to understand and internalize these values. With a gentle, fun, and age-appropriate approach, children will grow into individuals with good character, self-confidence, and a strong spiritual foundation.

Kurikulum Merdeka in Building Character and Spirituality from the Perspective of the Qur'an

The Kurikulum Merdeka provides a broader space to shape the character and spirituality of students, including those in early childhood, with an approach that emphasizes the freedom to learn according to the needs, interests, and contexts of each individual (Yuliati et al., 2024). One important component of this curriculum is the Pancasila Student Profile strengthening project, which encompasses religious and ethical values (Agnevia et al., 2025). These values align with the teachings of the Quran, which emphasize the importance of moral development from an early age, as reflected in Surah Luqman, verses 13-19, which contain moral and spiritual advice from a father to his son. The Quranic perspective places character education at the heart of the learning process. Values such as honesty, responsibility, compassion, and piety are essential character traits that must be instilled in children.

The Kurikulum Merdeka enables educators to contextually link learning to Quranic values, for example, through activities such as sharing stories of the prophets, promoting the habit of prayer, greeting others, and assisting others. With this curriculum's flexibility, teachers

can design meaningful and relevant activities that align with children's daily lives, while still using the Quran as the primary guideline for developing spirituality (Aziz et al., 2025). The integration of Quranic values into the Kurikulum Merdeka not only strengthens children's religious aspects but also fosters self-awareness and healthy social relationships. Children are encouraged to recognize Allah as the Most Merciful and learn to love His fellow creatures. This aligns with Surah Ali Imran, verse 159, which emphasizes the importance of gentleness in education and upbringing. Thus, the Kurikulum Merdeka can be a strategic tool for developing children's character and spirituality from an early age, with a strong foundation in Islamic teachings as outlined in the Quran.

METHODS

This research employed a library research method, an approach that systematically reviewed relevant and credible literature, including books, scientific journals, articles, and policy documents related to the Kurikulum Merdeka, early childhood Islamic education, character building, and spirituality. The literature review method employed in this study consists of six stages: identifying the topic, searching for relevant literature, developing arguments, surveying related works, critically evaluating the literature, and composing the review (Mahanum, 2021). The literature search was conducted selectively and purposefully to identify how the Kurikulum Merdeka is understood in the context of PAUD and the extent to which Islamic values can be integrated into its implementation. The literature reviewed included the official policy of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology regarding the Kurikulum Merdeka at the PAUD level, curriculum implementation guidelines, research journals related to values-based learning strategies in Islamic PAUD institutions, and theoretical writings on character education and spirituality in Islamic education.

These primary and secondary sources were analyzed qualitatively to identify patterns, themes, and trends in educational practices that align with Islamic values and the spirit of the Kurikulum Merdeka. Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive-analytical approach, describing the content of the reviewed literature and then critically analyzing it to uncover its relevance and connection to the research topic. The researcher focused on efforts to integrate character and spirituality content into the curriculum, as well as Islamic educational principles aligned with the Kurikulum Merdeka policy. The results of this analysis will serve as the basis for formulating theoretical conclusions and providing conceptual recommendations regarding strategies for implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka in effective and contextual early childhood Islamic education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Integration of Islamic Values within the Kurikulum Merdeka Framework

The integration of Islamic values within the Kurikulum Merdeka framework is highly relevant for shaping children's character from an early age. In Islamic education, values such as honesty, compassion, responsibility, and empathy are instilled in children from an early age through religious-based learning (Pulungan & Hayati, 2024). The Kurikulum Merdeka provides educators with the flexibility to adapt teaching materials to children's developmental needs, enabling Islamic values to be applied in more contextual and relevant ways. The

integration of Islamic values in the Kurikulum Merdeka can also be achieved by linking learning to the Pancasila Student Profile, which aligns with the principles of Islamic teachings. Values such as cooperation, independence, and critical thinking in the Pancasila Student Profile can be combined with Islamic teachings on cooperation, justice, and wisdom. This ensures that children not only develop cognitively but also become individuals with noble character and a solid spiritual foundation. Thus, the Kurikulum Merdeka provides a platform for integrating Islamic-based character education with the development of a generation ready to face future challenges.

The Kurikulum Merdeka essentially provides ample space for the development of local values and spirituality in the learning process. Successful strategies in early childhood Islamic education involve integrating Islamic values into everyday routines, employing engaging and innovative learning approaches such as Islamic-themed games and storytelling, and fostering partnerships with parents and the wider community (Salimah et al., 2023). Literature findings indicate that many Islamic PAUD institutions are beginning to utilize the flexibility of the Kurikulum Merdeka to incorporate religious content more organically, rather than simply as a separate subject. Activities that exemplify this implication include getting children used to greeting, praying before learning, and sharing food, as part of the project-based learning recommended in the Kurikulum Merdeka. Character building is carried out effectively through teacher role models and the repetition of good habits. This demonstrates that the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka can align with the principles of Islamic education, provided that teachers understand the appropriate approach and are creative in designing learning activities.

The Role of PAUD Teachers as Agents of Curriculum and Character and Spiritual Values

At the early childhood stage, children have a strong ability to absorb learning. They also display great curiosity by observing everything around them (Aziz et al., 2025). Teachers are a key factor in the successful implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, particularly in the context of Islamic education. Various literature sources have shown that many Islamic PAUD teachers still require further training to understand the concept of Kurikulum Merdeka and how to adapt it to Islamic principles creatively. Some challenges teachers face include limited references for thematic learning based on Islamic values and a lack of contextual and engaging teaching media (Suriati et al., 2025).

The role of PAUD teachers as curriculum agents is crucial in implementing education based on character and spiritual values. Teachers are not only instructors but also mentors who shape children's character and spirituality from an early age (Astuti & Hasan, 2020). Through a compassionate approach and a deep understanding of child development, teachers can integrate moral and religious values into every learning activity. Using contextual and engaging methods, teachers can provide play stimulation and deliver carefully designed learning through a thoughtfully arranged environment, thereby developing the potential of young children in early childhood (Anwar, 2022). In addition, teachers also serve as role models in implementing these values, which will significantly influence how children respond to the world and the people around them.

As agents of spiritual values, PAUD teachers also have a responsibility to introduce children to basic religious concepts that will shape their spiritual foundation. In Islamic education, for example, teachers can teach daily prayers, stories of the prophets, and meaningful yet straightforward worship practices that are both instructive and engaging. This process not only teaches cognitive aspects but, more importantly, provides direct experience of the importance of spirituality in children's lives. By integrating character and spiritual values into the curriculum, PAUD teachers act as facilitators, helping children grow into intelligent, well-mannered individuals with a strong moral and spiritual foundation to face future challenges. Several studies also show initiatives from PAUD institutions to form learning communities for teachers to share good practices. This is a positive step in enhancing teachers' capacity as agents of curriculum change. Teachers are not only technical implementers but also instillers of values and guides to children's character and spiritual development.

Institutional Support and Parental Involvement in Building Character and Spirituality from an Early Age

Curriculum implementation, particularly in character and spiritual development, is closely tied to institutional support and parental involvement. Literature findings indicate that Islamic PAUD institutions that successfully implement the Kurikulum Merdeka generally have visionary leadership, consistent habituation programs, and close partnerships with parents (Saragih, 2025). Support from educational institutions is crucial in developing children's character and spirituality from an early age. Educational institutions, particularly those at the PAUD level, play a strategic role in creating an environment that supports children's holistic growth and development. Through a curriculum focused on character and spiritual development, institutions can provide various activities that support moral and religious values, such as teaching honesty, compassion, and responsibility.

Furthermore, training teachers to serve as role models in implementing these values is also part of institutional support. With an institution's commitment to implementing character and spiritual education, children can gain a strong foundation to grow into individuals with good character and morals. Parental involvement is also crucial in supporting the development of a child's character and spirituality. Parents are their children's first educators, so their role in reinforcing the values taught in school is crucial (Ambarwati et al., 2025). Collaboration between parents and teachers in monitoring the development of children's character, as well as sharing information about the behaviors and values that need to be taught, will accelerate the process of internalizing these values in children's daily lives (Saragih, 2025). Through effective communication, parents can become more involved in school activities, such as religious education programs or social activities that promote the values of empathy and mutual assistance.

With parental support and involvement, children's character and spiritual development will be more comprehensive and consistent, both at home and in the school environment. The Kurikulum Merdeka encourages parental involvement in the educational process, for example, through collaborative learning projects at home or parenting activities themed around character education. There is a Pancasila Student Profile strengthening project, a more flexible learning and assessment process, with assessment results used as a basis for teachers to design play activities and for parents to encourage children to play at home,

thereby strengthening the role of parents as partners of the educational unit (Retnaningsih & Khairiyah, 2022). In the context of Islamic education, this is particularly relevant because the earliest formation of values begins in the family environment. Therefore, synergy between teachers and parents is key to ensuring that character and spiritual learning occur not only at school but also sustainably at home.

The Kurikulum Merdeka in Building Character and Spirituality from an Early Age from a Quranic Perspective

The Kurikulum Merdeka offers a flexible and contextual approach to PAUD, facilitating the development of character and spirituality in alignment with Islamic teachings (Daulay & Fauziddin, 2023). From a Quranic perspective, character education is highly emphasized, as this period is crucial for a child's moral and spiritual development. The Quran teaches values such as honesty, patience, empathy, and responsibility, which can be instilled through Islamic values-based learning, including teaching prayer, stories of the prophets, and simple worship practices that introduce children to spiritual aspects from an early age. Character-focused learning in early childhood is crucial because this is the period during which character formation will influence their life course. The Kurikulum Merdeka accommodates the needs of more personalized teaching, aligning with the child's developmental stage, and enables educators to effectively integrate religious values into every learning activity (Ningsih et al., 2025). The Quran places great emphasis on the development of children's spirituality, as evidenced by Surah Luqman, which teaches the importance of monotheism (tawhid), devotion to parents, and maintaining a relationship with God.

These religious values can be instilled in children's daily lives through school activities, such as involving them in communal prayer, introducing them to stories of the prophets, and cultivating Islamic etiquette or manners, which will foster a spiritual closeness with God from an early age. This approach provides a strong foundation for children to grow into individuals who are not only academically intelligent but also virtuous and have good character. The Kurikulum Merdeka also supports the development of children's character and spirituality by integrating the values of the Pancasila Student Profile, which align with Islamic teachings. The Pancasila Student Profile emphasizes values such as cooperation, independence, and critical thinking, all of which are relevant to Islamic teachings on cooperation, justice, and equality. The Kurikulum Merdeka plays a role in fostering students' character development by emphasizing core ethical principles, including honesty, fairness, and accountability (Brutu et al., 2023). Thus, the Kurikulum Merdeka can be a very effective tool for shaping a generation with a solid foundation of character and spirituality, ready to face life's challenges with integrity and maturity.

The Objectives of the Kurikulum Merdeka and Its Alignment with Islamic Education for Early Childhood

The primary goal of the Kurikulum Merdeka is to provide students with the freedom to develop according to their potential and interests. This curriculum is designed to accommodate diverse learning styles, foster creativity, and emphasize student-centered learning (Ningsih et al., 2025). One of its key goals is to build students' character through a

more flexible, contextual, and life-relevant approach. This curriculum allows each child to learn at their own pace and in the most effective way, while providing a fun and meaningful learning experience. This aligns with the goals of Islamic education, which emphasize the development of all aspects of a child's personality, including morality, spirituality, and intelligence. The Kurikulum Merdeka, in the context of Islamic education for early childhood, can support efforts to build strong character and a solid spiritual foundation (Pulungan & Hayati, 2024).

Islamic education, which focuses on teaching moral and religious values from an early age, can be integrated with the principles of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which gives children the freedom to explore their world with appropriate guidance. For example, Islamic values such as honesty, patience, responsibility, and compassion can be taught in a contextual and relevant way to everyday life. The Kurikulum Merdeka provides educators with the opportunity to adapt learning to children's circumstances, enabling them to absorb and internalize these teachings in their lives more easily (Cholilah et al., 2023). The alignment between the Kurikulum Merdeka and Islamic education for early childhood is evident in the flexibility of teaching methods that allow Islamic values to be directly integrated into the learning process. Project-based learning, social activities, and the introduction of the values of togetherness in the Kurikulum Merdeka align with Islamic teachings on the importance of cooperation, mutual assistance, and sharing.

This curriculum also provides space for spiritual teachings through simple worship activities, such as prayer, supplication, and an introduction to the stories of the prophets, which can be carried out in a fun and engaging way for children. In this regard, the Kurikulum Merdeka supports the holistic development of children by integrating character and spiritual education grounded in Islamic values, thereby contributing to the formation of morally upright and intellectually capable individuals. The goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasize character building, independent learning, and child-centered learning, align closely with the principles of Islamic education, which prioritize children's instincts. Islamic education emphasizes not only cognitive aspects but also affective and spiritual aspects, which are integral to the development of a person's personality. In the context of early childhood, a fun, compassionate, and Islamic-values-based learning approach can be an effective way to foster strong character and a solid spirituality from an early age.

Strengthening Early Childhood Spirituality Through Daily Learning Practices

Strengthening the spirituality of early childhood can be achieved through consistent learning practices in daily life, where religious values are directly applied in routine activities. In educational settings, such as PAUD, teaching prayer and introducing the stories of the prophets are effective ways to build a closeness to spiritual values in children. Furthermore, activities such as sharing with friends, expressing gratitude, and apologizing can also be part of spiritual learning, helping children understand the importance of manners and relationships with God and others. In this way, children's spirituality is not only taught through theory but also practiced through concrete actions, which will form good habits in them from an early age (Muhammad et al., 2021). The importance of integrating religious values into daily activities, such as practicing prayer before meals, greeting others, or maintaining good hygiene, is one way to strengthen children's spirituality.

These activities provide children with the opportunity to directly experience their connection with God and foster a more profound sense of responsibility and self-awareness. Teachers and parents play a crucial role in facilitating this process by serving as role models for their children. By strengthening spirituality through consistent daily practice, children will grow into individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent but also possess a spiritual depth that guides them throughout their lives (Oktavia & Khotimah, 2023). The findings of this study indicate that implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka in early childhood Islamic education fosters both character development and spirituality from an early age. Teachers observed that the integration of Islamic values into daily learning activities strengthened children's faith, discipline, and cooperation while also encouraging creativity, independence, and responsibility. This aligns with the theoretical perspective that PAUD serves as the foundation for moral and spiritual growth. Previous studies have also emphasized the significance of this curriculum approach.

Previous research has shown that the integration of Kurikulum Merdeka with Islamic Religious Education has shaped students' character in line with the Pancasila Student Profile, suggesting a strong link between curriculum design and national character-building goals (Ningsih et al., 2025). Previous research has highlighted that the Kurikulum Merdeka contributes to raising the overall quality of Islamic education in early childhood, indicating its potential to strengthen institutional standards as well as individual development (Achmad, 2024). Meanwhile, research underlined the importance of mindset shifts among teachers and students, noting that successful implementation depends not only on policy but also on changes in teaching practice and learning attitudes (Ashfarina et al., 2023). The present study confirms these earlier findings but provides a distinct contribution by showing that the curriculum structure itself—beyond teaching materials or teacher strategies—plays a critical role in enabling holistic character and spiritual formation. In this way, the study extends prior research by framing the Kurikulum Merdeka as more than a pedagogical tool; it is also a framework that systematically embeds values and practices necessary for shaping children's moral and spiritual foundations from the earliest stages of education.

Children's spirituality encompasses not only the introduction of religious concepts but also the development of relationships with God, others, and the environment. Studies show that spiritual education in Islam aligns with the character education goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka. Islamic PAUD institutions that have adopted the Kurikulum Merdeka incorporate habit-forming activities, such as praying the Dhuha prayer together, listening to stories about the Prophet, and exploring nature as a form of contemplation, thereby strengthening children's spiritual dimension from an early age. Learning is not dogmatic, but instead directed at building children's self-awareness that they are God's creatures with the duty to maintain trust, do good, and recognize the value of goodness. Models of activities that stimulate curiosity and awe of God's creation have been proven to foster spirituality naturally and enjoyably for children.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in early childhood Islamic education has been shown to significantly contribute to the formation of character and spirituality from an early age through a flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning approach. The research

findings suggest that Islamic values, such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and love for God, can be effectively instilled through play activities, by strengthening school culture, and by integrating the Pancasila Student Profile with Islamic teachings. These findings confirm that the holistic approach of the Kurikulum Merdeka, when combined with a value-rich Islamic curriculum, can provide a strong foundation for fostering children's personality and spiritual awareness. Therefore, this research enriches the literature on early childhood Islamic education by confirming that innovations in the national curriculum do not contradict, but rather can synergize with, the noble goals of Islamic education.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The author confirms that the data and content of the article are free from plagiarism.

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