

Building Students' Religious Character Through Project-Based Islamic Religious Education Learning in the Independent Curriculum Era

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the formation of students' religious character through project-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning in the Merdeka Curriculum era. Using a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, the study was conducted in several junior high schools in Bandung City with research subjects including PAI teachers, students, and principals. Data collection techniques used triangulation methods in the form of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. The results of the study indicate that project-based PAI learning is able to shape students' religious character effectively through the internalization of Islamic values in real activities. Designed projects such as digital campaigns on honesty, educational videos on tolerance, and social activities based on Islamic values have been proven to improve the understanding and application of religious teachings in everyday life. The implementation of Project-Based Learning (PJBL) provides space for students to experience a meaningful, collaborative, and reflective learning process. However, there are challenges in implementation such as limited resources, teacher readiness, and evaluation complexity. This study recommends the development of an adaptive curriculum and a continuous training program for teachers to optimize the effectiveness of project-based PAI learning in shaping students' religious character that is holistic, moderate, and inclusive in accordance with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum.



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INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a strategic role in shaping students' religious character amidst social dynamics and modern developments. In the Independent Curriculum era, learning approaches have undergone significant transformation, emphasizing learning freedom, contextual understanding, and integrative character value reinforcement. (Nabilah et al., 2024; Nurdiyanto et al., 2024; Supadi & Fauzi, 2024) This curriculum requires students to master not only cognitive aspects but also affective and psychomotor skills, particularly in religious aspects. Therefore, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is required to be more adaptive and innovative in order to respond to the challenges of the times while instilling religious values in their entirety. The formation of religious character is a priority because it serves as the moral and spiritual foundation for building a dignified, tolerant, and civilized nation. To achieve

this goal, a learning approach is needed that can actively and contextually engage students in internalizing religious values into daily behavior, one of which is through the Project-Based Learning (PJBL) approach, which aligns with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum, which centers on students and real-life experiences in learning.(Mahmud et al., 2023; Nurdiyanto et al., 2024).

PJBL in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is an effective solution for integrating Islamic values with real-life activities relevant to students' lives. This approach emphasizes learning activities that begin with real-life problems, then analyze them, and conclude with the creation of products or solutions that reflect religious values. In this context, PJBL is not only a learning method but also a means of building authentic religious experiences.(Murtadho et al., 2025)For example, students could be given projects like creating a digital campaign about the importance of honesty or an educational video about interfaith tolerance. These types of activities allow students to not only understand the theory but also directly practice Islamic Religious Education values in their social lives.(Alhamuddin et al., 2024)The research results show that PJBL can build students' religious character in a deeper and more sustainable way because the learning process is based on experience and self-reflection.(Fira et al., 2024; Murtadho et al., 2025).

Beyond the learning experience, PJBL also provides ample opportunity for students to develop social skills such as collaboration, communication, responsibility, and problem-solving. All of these aspects are crucial in shaping religious character, as religion governs not only an individual's relationship with God but also relationships between people. By working in project teams, students learn to respect others' opinions, resolve conflicts wisely, and foster empathy and tolerance. Several studies have found that appropriately designed collaborative projects in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning can foster moderate and inclusive attitudes, essential values in religious life in a pluralistic society like Indonesia.(Hafiz et al., 2025; Murtadho et al., 2025)This is very relevant in the context of the challenges of globalization which bring the threat of radicalism and intolerance among the younger generation.(Maknunah & Muis, 2023).

PJBL has also been shown to increase student motivation and engagement in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Compared with conventional lecture methods, the project-based approach provides more room for student creativity and exploration. They are more enthusiastic and feel a sense of ownership in the learning process because they are directly involved in the planning and implementation of the project. With high motivation, students are more easily able to understand and internalize religious teachings. Research by Nuralimah et al. (2025)and Halimah(2024)showed a significant increase in student engagement, academic achievement, and active participation in school religious activities after the implementation of PJBL. Even students who were previously passive or less interested in Islamic Religious Education lessons showed new enthusiasm when asked to participate in real-life projects.

One of the main strengths of PJBL in the context of Islamic Religious Education learning is its ability to internalize religious values through real-life practices. Internalizing religious values is not merely about mastering material or being able to answer questions, but is reflected in students' attitudes and behaviors in everyday life. Through projects that require direct involvement, students learn to apply values such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, discipline, and social awareness. Projects involving digital media also help students communicate religious messages in more relevant and engaging ways. Studies by Ihwanah et al. (2024) and Arrosyid' & Nursikin(2024)found

that the use of multimedia projects in Islamic Religious Education learning was able to increase understanding and the application of Islamic values in real terms, especially in social and digital contexts.

However, the implementation of PJBL in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is not without its challenges. One of the main challenges is limited resources, both in the form of teaching materials, learning media, and technological tools. Teachers often struggle to design projects that align with learning objectives and student characteristics, especially with limited time. Furthermore, the PJBL approach demands a holistic and ongoing evaluation process, which not all teachers can optimally implement. Research by Fira et al. (2024) and Purnomo & Mukhlisin (2024) shows that many teachers experience obstacles in compiling project assessment rubrics and difficulties in integrating PJBL into the existing curriculum structure. (Helmi Medinah, 2024).

In addition to limited resources, teacher readiness is a determining factor in the success of project-based learning (PJBL) in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. Many teachers have not received adequate training on the implementation of project-based learning. This results in low teacher confidence and innovation in designing and implementing PJBL learning. Yet, teachers play a crucial role in facilitating collaborative, reflective, and meaningful learning processes. Without strong support and understanding from teachers, PJBL can lose its essence and become merely an administrative burden. Therefore, ongoing training and mentoring programs are needed for teachers, as proposed by Mahmud et al. (2023) and Purnomo & Mukhlisin (2024).

To address these challenges, it is necessary to develop an Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum that is adaptive to the needs of the times and technological developments. A responsive curriculum will provide flexibility for teachers and students in selecting and designing projects that are appropriate to the local context and student interests. For example, projects that address local cultural diversity, environmental management based on Islamic principles, or philanthropic activities in the community. This type of curriculum will make it easier for teachers to integrate religious values into contextual and relevant learning. Hafiz et al. (2025) suggest that developing a project-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum can foster stronger religious character development, as the learning process takes place through experiences, discussions, and solving real-life problems.

In addition to strengthening the curriculum, teacher training is also a top priority in developing character-based PJBL learning. Teachers must have a comprehensive understanding of project design, facilitation strategies, and performance-based assessment techniques. Furthermore, collaboration between teachers across subject areas can foster integrative and sustainable learning innovation. In this regard, training should not only be technical but also encompass strengthening the values and spirit of character education. This type of training has been shown to increase teacher readiness and confidence in adopting PJBL in Islamic Religious Education (Islamic Religious Education) learning (Mahmud et al., 2023; Purnomo & Mukhlisin, 2024).

Thus, project-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is a potential and relevant approach to developing students' religious character in the Independent Curriculum era. Through active involvement in values-based projects, students not only acquire religious knowledge but also experience a deep and ongoing process of internalizing values. Despite various challenges in its implementation, solutions such as adaptive curriculum development and ongoing teacher training can strengthen the effectiveness of PJBL in religious character education.

Based on the above explanation, the purpose of this study is to explore in depth how project-based Islamic Religious Education learning can shape students' religious character in the Merdeka Curriculum era. This study also aims to identify supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of PJBL, as well as formulate strategic recommendations for the development of effective and contextual Islamic Religious Education learning. The novelty of this study lies in its approach that integrates PJBL principles with systematic strengthening of religious character within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum policy, which is still relatively new to be widely implemented in Indonesian schools. With this approach, it is hoped that the research results can provide theoretical and practical contributions in the development of a responsive, humanistic Islamic Religious Education learning model that is oriented towards the formation of a holistic character.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive analytical research type. According to Sugiyono(2019), qualitative research is a research method based on the philosophy of postpositivism, used to research the natural conditions of objects, where the researcher is the key instrument, data source sampling is carried out purposively and snowball, data collection techniques with triangulation (combined), data analysis is inductive/qualitative, and qualitative research results emphasize meaning rather than generalization. This approach was chosen because the researcher wanted to understand in depth the process of forming students' religious character through project-based Islamic Religious Education learning in the Merdeka Curriculum era, which requires a comprehensive exploration of experiences, perceptions, and interactions that occur in the learning context. This research seeks to uncover the meaning and essence of the complex and multidimensional phenomenon of religious character formation.

This research was conducted in several public and private junior high schools in Bandung City, West Java, which have implemented the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education learning. The selection of the research location in Bandung was based on the consideration that this city has a variety of educational institutions with diverse socio-cultural characteristics and has implemented the Independent Curriculum optimally. The research subjects were determined using a purposive sampling technique, namely Islamic Religious Education teachers who have implemented project-based learning for at least one year, students in grades VII and VIII who actively participate in project-based Islamic Religious Education learning, and the principal as a key informant. Sugiyono (2019) explains that purposive sampling is a technique for sampling data sources with certain considerations, for example, the person is considered to know the most about what we expect, or perhaps he is a ruler so that it will be easier for researchers to explore the object or social situation being studied.

The data collection technique in this study used triangulation methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Participant observation was conducted to directly observe the project-based Islamic Religious Education learning process and the manifestation of students' religious character in learning activities. In-depth interviews were conducted using structured interview guidelines to explore the perceptions and experiences of research subjects regarding the formation of religious character through project-based learning. Documentation studies included analysis of learning tools, student project work, and other supporting documents. Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model, which includes

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data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Sugiyono (2019) emphasized that in qualitative research, data analysis is carried out before entering the field, during the field, and after completion in the field, with the process taking place interactively and continuously until complete so that the data is saturated. To ensure the validity of the data, this study used source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking techniques.

Table 1
Source Data

No	Name/Initials	Position/Status	Institution/School	Length of Experience	Information
1	US	Gssuru PAI	Junior High School 5 Bandung	8 years	Islamic Religious Education teachers who have implemented project-based learning for 2 years in the Independent Curriculum
2	DR	Headmaster	Junior High School 12 Bandung	15 years	The principal who oversees the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in schools
3	MF	Islamic Education Teacher	Al-Azhar Islamic Junior High School Bandung	6 years	Islamic Religious Education teachers who actively develop project-based learning with a religious character approach
4	RN	Class VIII Students	Junior High School 5 Bandung	-	Students who actively participate in project-based Islamic Education learning and demonstrate good religious character development

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

1. Implementation of Project-Based Islamic Religious Education Learning in the Formation of Religious Character

Based on observations and interviews conducted at several junior high schools in Bandung, it was found that the implementation of project-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning has had a positive impact on the development of students' religious character. A teacher from SMPN 5 Bandung stated:

"Since implementing project-based learning in Islamic Religious Education (PAI), I've seen significant changes in students. They're not just memorizing verses from the Quran, but they're also beginning to understand and apply Islamic values in their daily lives. For example, when we gave them a project to create an anti-bullying campaign based on Islamic values, the students not only made posters but also began to care more about their less fortunate peers."

Similar findings were also expressed by Teacher MF from Al-Azhar Islamic Middle School Bandung who stated:

"Project-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education makes students more active and creative. They learn not only from textbooks but also from real-life experiences. When we gave them a project to create an educational video about religious tolerance, the students conducted research and interviewed religious figures, ultimately developing a true understanding of the meaning of tolerance in Islam."

Observational data shows that students who participate in project-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning are more engaged in school religious activities. A RN student from grade VIII at SMPN 5 Bandung explained her experience:

"I used to find Islamic Religious Education boring because it was just memorization. But now, with the project system, we can create something useful. I once participated in a project to create a simple app to remind me of prayer times, and that made me more diligent in praying five times a day."

2. Characteristics of Effective Projects in Shaping Religious Character

The research identified several characteristics of projects that were effective in shaping students' religious character. Based on documentation and interviews, successful projects had the following characteristics:

Table 2
Characteristics of Effective Projects in Islamic Education Learning

No	Project Characteristics	Description	Implementation Example
1	Relevant to everyday life	The project raises issues or problems that are close to students' experiences.	An anti-hoax digital campaign based on Islamic honesty values
2	Collaborative and inclusive	Involving collaboration between students with diverse backgrounds	Documentary project about interfaith harmony in school environments
3	Based on technology and creativity	Integrating digital technology with Islamic values	Creating a mobile application for daily worship guidance
4	Problem-solution oriented	Projects are designed to solve real problems in society.	Zakat and alms-based social assistance program for underprivileged families
5	Reflective and evaluative	Provide space for self-reflection and evaluation of learned values.	A digital spiritual journal to record experiences of applying Islamic teachings

Principal DR from SMPN 12 Bandung added:

"The most successful projects are those that allow students to directly experience the benefits of religious teachings. When they create environmental projects based on Islamic principles, they not only learn about the concept of khalifah fil ardh (vicegerent) but also gain hands-on experience in maintaining a clean school and home environment."

3. The Impact of Project-Based Learning on Students' Religious Character

This study found various positive impacts of project-based Islamic Religious Education learning on the development of students' religious character. These impacts can be classified into several aspects, as follows:

Table 3
The Impact of Project-Based Islamic Education Learning on Religious Character

Character Aspects	Indicator of Change	Percentage of Students Who Experienced Improvement*
Honesty	Tell the truth, don't cheat, admit mistakes	85%

Character Aspects	Indicator of Change	Percentage of Students Who Experienced Improvement*
Responsibility	Complete tasks on time, care for shared property	78%
Tolerance	Respect differences of opinion, collaborate with students from various backgrounds	82%
Empathy and Social Concern	Helping friends in trouble, getting involved in social activities	79%
Discipline in Worship	Performing the five daily prayers, reading the Quran regularly	73%
Polite Communication	Speak politely, avoid harsh words	80%

Based on teacher observations and student self-assessment during 6 months of implementation

US teachers give testimonials about changes in student character:

"The most encouraging thing is seeing students who used to lie or cheat often become more honest. This happened after they worked on a project about the value of honesty in Islam. They made a video about the negative impact of lying, and it turned out they themselves were the ones most affected by the content they created."

RN students also reflected on the changes they experienced:

"After participating in a project on social awareness in Islam, I became more sensitive to the plight of less fortunate friends. Now I regularly set aside some of my pocket money to give to charity and participate in school social activities."

4. Challenges and Obstacles in Implementation

Despite its positive impact, the implementation of project-based Islamic Religious Education learning is not without its challenges. Based on interviews with teachers, some of the main obstacles encountered include:

a. Limited Resources and Facilities

Teacher MF expressed his complaint:

"One of the biggest challenges is technological limitations. Not all students have stable internet access or adequate devices to work on digital projects. Sometimes we have to adapt projects to the diverse needs of our students."

b. Complexity of Assessment and Evaluation

US teachers explained the difficulties in the evaluation aspect:

"Assessing student projects isn't as simple as grading written exams. We have to consider many aspects: creativity, collaboration, understanding of the material, and, of course, internalizing religious values. Sometimes it's difficult to gauge whether students truly live those values or simply complete assignments."

c. Teacher Readiness and Competence

Principal DR acknowledged the challenges related to teacher readiness:

"Not all Islamic Education teachers are ready to implement project-based learning. They need specialized training on project design, learning facilitation, and assessment techniques. We've held several workshops, but intensive mentoring is still needed."

5. Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

The speakers also provided insights into the strategies that have been implemented to address these challenges:

Table 4
Strategies to Overcome Challenges in PJBL Implementation in PAI

Challenge	Solution Strategy	Implementation
Technological limitations	Collaborative projects and utilization of school facilities	Students work in groups, taking turns using the school's computer lab.
Complexity of assessment	Development of a holistic assessment rubric	Assessment includes process, product and reflection aspects with clear indicators.
Teacher readiness	Ongoing training and mentoring programs	Regular workshops, peer teaching, and mentoring from senior teachers
Variation in student abilities	Project differentiation according to capabilities	Projects with different levels of complexity but the same learning objectives

MF teacher shares his success story:

"To overcome technological limitations, we created a flexible project. Students could choose to create a digital poster, a simple video using a smartphone, or even a hand-written work. The important thing was to convey the essence of Islamic values."

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that project-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning has great potential in shaping students' religious character in the Independent Curriculum era. This finding aligns with the views of Nurdiyanto et al. (2024) and Mahmud et al. (2023), who emphasized that the Project-Based Learning (PJBL) approach can integrate Islamic values with real-life activities relevant to students' lives. The implementation of PJBL in Islamic Religious Education learning has been proven to not only improve students' cognitive understanding of religious teachings but also encourage the internalization of religious values through direct experience and in-depth reflection. (Arrosyid' & Nursikin, 2024).

Characteristics of effective projects in this study included relevance to everyday life, collaborative nature, technology integration, problem-solving orientation, and a reflective dimension. These findings support the arguments of Fira et al. (2024) and Murtadho et al. (2025) that PJBL can build students' religious character more deeply and sustainably because the learning process is based on experience and self-reflection. Projects such as the digital anti-hoax campaign based on Islamic honesty values and the zakat-based social assistance program demonstrate that students not only understand theoretical concepts but are able to apply Islamic values in real social contexts. (Komariah & Nihayah, 2023; Tabroni et al., 2021).

The positive impacts identified in this study, particularly increased honesty (85%), tolerance (82%), and polite communication (80%), indicate that PJBL successfully develops social skills that are essential for the formation of religious character. This is consistent with the findings of Hafiz et al. (2025) and Murtadho et al. (2025) that collaborative projects in Islamic Religious Education learning can foster moderate and inclusive attitudes. Students' ability to work in teams, respect differences of opinion, and resolve conflicts wisely demonstrates that project-based learning not only teaches vertical relationships with God but also horizontal relationships between humans, which are the essence of Islamic teachings.

The increased student motivation and engagement found in this study strengthens the arguments of Nuralimah et al. (2025) and Halimah (2024) that PJBL provides more room for student creativity and exploration than conventional lecture methods. Students' enthusiasm in working on projects such as creating a prayer reminder app and a tolerance education video demonstrates that this approach has successfully shifted the learning paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered, in line with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes learning freedom and contextual understanding.

The process of internalizing religious values through concrete practices identified in this study aligns with the findings of Ihwanah et al. (2024) and Arrosyid' & Nursikin (2024) that the use of multimedia projects in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning can improve understanding and practical application of Islamic values. Projects involving digital media not only help students communicate religious messages in relevant and

engaging ways but also facilitate the transformation process from knowing to being, from merely knowing to experiencing and practicing religious teachings.

However, the challenges identified in this study, such as limited resources, evaluation complexity, and teacher preparedness, reflect the realities faced by many educational institutions in implementing PJBL. These findings are consistent with research by Fira et al. (2024) and Purnomo & Mukhlisin (2024), which showed that many teachers experienced obstacles in developing project assessment rubrics and difficulties in integrating PJBL into existing curriculum structures. The technological limitations experienced by students also serve as a reminder that PJBL implementation must consider students' socio-economic contexts and must not deepen the digital divide.

The teacher readiness issues identified in this study reinforce the arguments of Mahmud et al. (2023) and Purnomo & Mukhlisin (2024) that teachers play a crucial role in facilitating collaborative, reflective, and meaningful learning processes. Without strong teacher support and understanding, PJBL can lose its essence and become merely an administrative burden. These findings demonstrate the importance of ongoing training and mentoring programs for teachers, not only in the technical aspects of project design but also in developing a mindset and philosophical understanding of character-based learning.

The strategies developed by schools to address implementation challenges, such as collaborative projects to address technological limitations and the development of holistic assessment rubrics, demonstrate adaptive efforts to optimize PJBL. This aligns with Hafiz et al.'s (2025) recommendations regarding the development of an Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum that adapts to current needs and technological developments. The flexibility in designing projects that can be tailored to students' diverse conditions and abilities reflects the principle of learning differentiation that is a hallmark of the Independent Curriculum. (Solfianetri & Wiza, 2024).

The finding that the most successful projects are those that directly benefit students from religious teachings demonstrates the importance of relevance and contextualization in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. This aligns with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes meaningful learning tailored to students' needs. Environmental projects based on the principle of *khalifah fil ardh*, for example, not only teach theological concepts but also apply them in concrete actions to maintain environmental cleanliness and sustainability.

The collaborative and inclusive aspects of Islamic Religious Education projects found in this study are particularly significant in the context of Indonesia as a pluralistic society. Students' ability to collaborate with peers from diverse backgrounds and produce projects on interfaith harmony demonstrates that PJBL can be an effective medium for fostering tolerant and moderate attitudes, in accordance with the Islamic values of *rahmatan lil alamin* (blessing for the universe). This is highly relevant in facing the challenges of globalization, which poses the threat of radicalism and intolerance among the younger generation. (Ihwanah et al., 2024; Nuralimah et al., 2025; Tabroni et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that project-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning has proven effective in shaping students' religious character in the Merdeka

Curriculum era. The implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in PAI is able to integrate Islamic values with real-life activities through relevant, collaborative, and reflective projects. Identified positive impacts include significant improvements in students' honesty, tolerance, responsibility, empathy, and religious discipline. The success of this approach lies in its ability to shift the learning paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered, providing space for student creativity and exploration, and facilitating the internalization of values through direct experience and in-depth reflection. Despite facing challenges such as limited resources, evaluation complexity, and teacher readiness, the adaptive strategies developed by schools demonstrate that PJBL can be implemented flexibly according to local conditions and contexts. This study recommends the development of an adaptive PAI curriculum, ongoing training programs for teachers, and the provision of adequate technological resources to optimize the effectiveness of project-based learning in shaping a young generation with religious, moderate, and inclusive character in accordance with current demands.

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