

Needs Analysis for Developing an Islamic Religious Education and Character Curriculum Incorporating Local Wisdom in West Java Senior High Schools

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the needs for developing the Merdeka Curriculum in the subject of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Character, based on local wisdom at the senior high school level, with a focus on the cultural context of West Java communities. The background of this research lies in the predominance of textual and normative approaches in PAI instruction, which have not fully accommodated local values such as religious traditions, regional languages, and living cultural practices within society. Using a mixed-methods approach with a concurrent triangulation design, data were collected through questionnaires and interviews involving 373 students and 191 PAI teachers from five public senior high schools in West Java. The findings indicate that more than 70% of respondents support the integration of local wisdom values into the PAI curriculum. The most prominent aspects include the need for contextual learning guidelines, the scarcity of locally relevant textbooks, and the importance of using regional languages in delivering religious materials. The study concludes that developing a PAI curriculum adaptive to local cultural contexts is not only crucial for enhancing the relevance of learning but also strategic in shaping an inclusive, moderate religious identity rooted in students' social realities. The results of this needs analysis are expected to serve as both a conceptual and practical foundation for designing a PAI curriculum that is contextual and responsive to the dynamics of Indonesia's multicultural society.

Keywords: Needs Analysis, Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education, Local Wisdom, Contextualization, West Java.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Indonesia's multicultural and multireligious society has faced serious challenges arising from social and religious tensions. One of the main sources of these tensions is the friction between normative Islamic teachings and the local cultural practices that remain alive and evolving within communities. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the context of education, especially in the subject of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at the senior high school level, where students are often confronted with instruction that is not contextualized and tends to overlook local wisdom as an integral part of their cultural identity. (Kurniawan, 2014). Students are often exposed to instruction that lacks contextual relevance and tends to disregard local wisdom as an integral component of their cultural identity (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024).

The existing PAI curriculum has largely been textual in nature and characterized by an Arabization-oriented approach, offering limited space for the expression of local cultural traditions deeply rooted in society, such as *sedekah bumi* (earth thanksgiving), *marhabaan* (prophetic praise chanting), or *kawin gantung* (delayed marriage). As a result, a gap has emerged between the religious values taught in schools and students' everyday practices, which has the potential to create cognitive dissonance and ideological polarization. (Madjid, 1992; Setiyawan, 2012)

Indonesia's ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse society contains complex social dynamics, particularly in the sphere of religious life. In practice, many Islamic teachings—especially in the field of *fiqh* (covering *muamalah*, *munakahat*, *ibadah*, and *waris*)—have

undergone adaptation or acculturation to the extent that they have become traditions embraced by communities for generations. However, a number of these practices have generated controversy, as they are not aligned with, and in some cases contradict, the principles of Islamic *sharia*.

For example, in *muamalah*, the practice of *gadai gantung* (pledging land or a motorcycle without a definite time limit and with accrued interest) is still common. While culturally accepted, it contains elements of *riba* (usury) from a jurisprudential perspective. In the sphere of marriage (*munakahat*), customs such as *uang sawer* (ritual scattering of coins), sacralizing the amount of *seserahan* (wedding gifts), or prohibiting marriage in certain months can still be found, particularly in Sundanese and Javanese traditions. Although perceived as customs that strengthen communal bonds, these practices often lack a valid *shar'i* basis and may even conflict with the principle of *tawhid* if accompanied by mystical beliefs.

In matters of worship, traditions such as burning incense, offering food to ancestral spirits, or performing *tolak bala* (misfortune-warding) rituals with animistic elements persist in some regions, including West Java. For instance, in wedding celebrations, some communities bury pieces of meat or specific foods around the venue as a form of “permission” to unseen beings. In the context of death, certain regions still hold rituals involving incense burning and mantra recitation to help locate a missing body or to prevent the spirit of the deceased from disturbing surviving family members. While framed as customary practices, these traditions may, from a *fiqh* perspective, carry elements of *shirk* (associating partners with God) if not grounded in sound Islamic creed.

The issue becomes more complex when there is no clear boundary between cultural customs and religious rituals. In the context of PAI instruction in schools, this often creates confusion among students, as the religious teachings they receive in the classroom clash with the values and customs they encounter in their families and communities.

This phenomenon calls for systematic efforts to bridge the gap between normative Islamic principles and the contextual cultural practices of society. One strategy considered effective is the development of a PAI curriculum grounded in local wisdom, enabling religious education to become more contextual, moderate, and inclusive without compromising the integrity of Islamic teachings. The *Merdeka Curriculum*, which allows adaptation to local contexts, offers a significant opportunity to realize this vision.

However, before development can proceed, a comprehensive needs analysis is necessary. Such an analysis aims to identify the extent of existing gaps, the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the importance of integrating local wisdom, and the concrete forms of local wisdom that can be incorporated into the curriculum without introducing theological bias (*aqidah*). This study specifically conducted a needs analysis in five public senior high schools in West Java Province and found that more than 70% of teachers and students perceived an urgent need to align local values with Islamic religious education in schools.

Against this background, this study focuses on a needs analysis for developing the *Merdeka Curriculum* in the subject of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Character Education based on local wisdom. The results are expected to serve as the foundation for designing a curriculum model capable of bridging normative Islamic spirituality with the deeply rooted socio-cultural context of local communities..

The *Merdeka Curriculum* presents a strategic opportunity to address these tensions, as it emphasizes the importance of contextual learning that is relevant to local social and cultural conditions. However, its implementation in PAI remains limited, particularly in terms of systematically integrating local wisdom values (Husni, 2024). A field study in five public senior high schools in West Java Province revealed that more than 70% of teachers and students support the inclusion of values such as *Silih Asah*, *Silih Asih*, *Silih Asuh*, and *Sabilulungan* in PAI learning to enhance its relevance and effectiveness.

At the same time, various international studies underscore the importance of culturally sensitive religious education curricula as a means of strengthening identity, tolerance, and inclusivity (Zubaidi & Jali, 2025). Religious curricula that are responsive to cultural contexts have been shown to reduce fundamentalism and strengthen pluralism. Religious education that integrates local wisdom can serve as a strategic platform for fostering national character and promoting religious moderation.

Given the complexity of the relationship between religion and culture in the educational context, there is a need for systematic efforts to identify the requirements for developing a PAI curriculum based on local wisdom that is not only contextual but also responsive to contemporary socio-religious challenges. This study aims to analyze the needs for integrating the local wisdom values of West Java communities into the teaching of Islamic Religious Education and Character Education at the senior high school level. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research explores in depth the perceptions and opinions of teachers and students in order to formulate a more relevant and meaningful direction for curriculum development. The results of this needs analysis are expected to provide both a conceptual and empirical foundation for developing a PAI curriculum that is inclusive, adaptive to local culture, and applicable as a reference in formulating contextual religious education policies at the national level.

Needs analysis is a crucial and decisive first step in the curriculum development process, particularly in realizing a curriculum that is contextual and relevant to the characteristics of students as well as the socio-cultural realities of their environment. In the context of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, needs analysis extends beyond the cognitive aspects of learning to encompass affective and socio-cultural dimensions, including how local wisdom values can be systematically integrated into instruction. As (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018) emphasize, an effective curriculum must be developed based on the actual needs of learners, communities, and the dynamics of social change. Therefore, the mixed-methods approach used in this study is highly relevant, as it enables an in-depth exploration of stakeholders' perceptions, experiences, and expectations while also providing a quantitative picture of the urgent needs in PAI and Character Education.

The *Merdeka Curriculum* provides flexibility for educational institutions to adapt learning content to local characteristics, thereby revitalizing local cultural values as part of strengthening national character and identity. In the context of West Java, local wisdom values such as *silih asah*, *silih asih*, *silih asuh*, *sabilulungan*, and *gotong royong* are cultural assets rich in moral and spiritual meaning, yet they have not been fully accommodated in PAI instruction at schools. Therefore, it is essential to systematically map the needs for integrating these elements of local wisdom within the framework of the current national curriculum. This needs analysis approach draws on the conceptual model proposed by Taba (Taba & Spalding, 1962), which asserts that the curriculum development process should ideally begin with a diagnosis of needs

as a fundamental step for determining content and instructional methods that are relevant to students' realities.

Several previous studies have discussed the importance of contextual and integrative approaches in religious education. (Pahrudin, 2010) examined the development of a multicultural-based PAI curriculum in senior high schools and found that this approach could foster an inclusive and tolerant learning environment. Similar findings were reported by (Asfiati, 2016), who emphasized that a humanist value-based PAI curriculum can enhance the balance between students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Rusnawati (Rusnawati, 2021) noted that PAI instruction remains predominantly normative and textual, with little engagement in students' social and cultural realities. However, the majority of these studies remain normative in nature or focus primarily on curriculum design, and have yet to explicitly map the needs for integrating local wisdom within a specific cultural context, such as Sundanese culture in West Java..

A literature search using academic search engines such as *Publish or Perish*, Garuda, and Moraref revealed no studies that specifically analyze the needs for developing a PAI and Character Education curriculum based on local wisdom in West Java using a mixed-methods approach. This gap underscores the urgency of conducting research that comprehensively maps the needs of students, teachers, and other educational stakeholders within the context of local cultural identity. Therefore, this study is expected not only to fill a scholarly gap in the field of contextual curriculum development but also to provide practical contributions for policymakers and curriculum designers in creating a PAI curriculum that is adaptive, moderate, and aligned with local cultural values.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a concurrent triangulation design, a strategy that combines quantitative and qualitative data collected simultaneously but analyzed separately, then compared and interpreted in an integrated manner to achieve strong cross-validation (Plano Clark, 2017)(Adrias & Ruswandi, 2025). The scope of the study is limited to a needs analysis for developing the *Merdeka Curriculum* for the subject of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Character Education based on local wisdom, specifically at the senior high school (*SMA*) level. The research does not cover the stages of curriculum design, development, implementation, or evaluation. The triangulation design was chosen so that quantitative findings could be validated and enriched in depth by qualitative results, thus providing a comprehensive picture of the actual needs in the field (Sugiyono, 2022).

The research sites were distributed across five public senior high schools (*SMA Negeri*) in West Java Province: SMAN 1 Surade, SMAN 24 Garut, SMAN 2 Kuningan, SMAN 1 Pusanagara, and SMAN 4 Bandung, selected using a multistage random sampling technique. For collecting teacher needs analysis data, the study employed probability sampling with a simple random sampling approach to determine respondents from the teacher population. This technique was chosen to ensure that every member of the population had an equal chance of being selected, thereby producing data that are representative and generalizable. The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula with a margin of error of 5% from the total population of 366 PAI teachers in senior high schools across the five districts. Consequently, the teacher sample for this study consisted of 191 respondents.

For the student needs survey, the population comprised all students from the five public senior high schools in West Java Province where the research was conducted. Based on data obtained from each school, the total student population was 5,623. To determine the sample size, the researchers applied two approaches: Slovin's formula with a margin of error of 5% and a 95% confidence level. As a result, the sample size was set at 373 students, selected through proportional random sampling—allocating sample numbers proportionally to each school based on its student population. Subsequently, students from each school were randomly selected to ensure balanced and objective representation.

For quantitative data collection, a closed-ended questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale (scores 1–5) was employed to measure students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the relevance of PAI content, the alignment of the curriculum with local culture, and the need to integrate local wisdom into instruction. The questionnaire was developed based on an indicator grid of identified needs and underwent both validity and reliability testing. Content validity was assessed through expert judgment by lecturers specializing in curriculum and Islamic education. Empirical validity was tested using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation on a tryout sample of 30 respondents, with all items obtaining r -calculated values greater than the r -table value (r -table = 0.361 at $\alpha = 0.05$), indicating good item validity. (Suharsimi, 2005). Subsequently, reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha produced a coefficient greater than 0.8, indicating that the questionnaire had high reliability and was suitable for large-scale use. (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994)(Muijs, 2004).

To calculate the level of needs analysis, the questionnaire scores were interpreted descriptively based on the following ranges:

Tabel 1 Interpretation of the Needs Analysis Questionnaire Tendencies

Mean Score Range	Percentage (%)	Interpretation
4,21 – 5,00	84,1 – 100	Very High (Highly Required)
3,41 – 4,20	68,1 – 84,0	High (Required)
2,61 – 3,40	52,1 – 68,0	Moderate (Needs Attention)
1,81 – 2,60	36,1 – 52,0	Low (Less Required)
1,00 – 1,80	20,0 – 36,0	Very Low (Not Required)

Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with PAI teachers and document analysis of syllabi, lesson plans (*RPP*), teaching modules, and documentation of local cultural practices within the school environment and surrounding communities. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to obtain mean scores, percentages, and trends in needs. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analyzed using the interactive technique proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014).

To ensure internal and external validity, method and source triangulation were employed, along with member checking with key informants to confirm the accuracy of narrative data. Consequently, the concurrent triangulation design applied in this study was able to produce a strong and comprehensive synthesis of data, depicting the actual needs for integrating local

wisdom into the PAI curriculum in schools, and serving as a conceptual foundation for developing a curriculum model that is both contextual and culturally adaptive.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The development of relevant and contextual Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curricula requires a strong foundation grounded in an understanding of students' actual needs. In this context, a local wisdom-based approach becomes essential for bridging instructional content with students' socio-cultural environment. As an initial step, a needs analysis was conducted to assess the urgency of implementing a local wisdom-based PAI curriculum at the senior high school (*SMA*) level. The results of this analysis serve as a basis for designing a curriculum that is not only normative but also adaptive to the local values embedded within the community.

This section presents the findings of a comprehensive needs analysis conducted to inform the development of the *Merdeka Curriculum* for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Character Education based on local wisdom in West Java. The analysis encompasses the perceptions and needs of students and PAI teachers, as well as relevant environmental factors.

Student Needs Analysis

The student needs analysis involved 373 students from five public senior high schools (*SMA Negeri*) in West Java. The overall score for student needs was 73.16%, indicating a “High” or “Required” level for the development of a local wisdom-based PAI curriculum. The details for each indicator are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Summary of Student Needs Analysis

Student Need Aspect	Percentage Agree/Strongly Agree	Brief Description of Findings
Perception of Disputes over Traditions in Society	21,4%	A majority of students (57.3%) felt that disputes related to traditions, culture, or worship do not occur frequently in their communities.
Local Traditions and Culture Rarely Taught in Schools	37,3%	Some students felt that many local religious practices and cultural activities are rarely taught or discussed in schools.
Lack of Knowledge on the Legal Status of Traditions	40,7%	Most students did not know or had limited understanding of the legal status of local religious practices and traditions.
Difficulty Distinguishing Permissible and Prohibited Traditions	38,7%	Some students found it difficult to distinguish between permissible and prohibited traditions and cultural practices related to religion.
Ease of Understanding Sermons in Local Language	76,7%	A majority of students found it easier to understand religious sermons when delivered in the local language (Sundanese).
Learning Resources Inadequately Accommodate Local Culture	60,1%	Most students felt that PAI and Character Education textbooks do not fully address local customs, traditions, and cultural expressions of religious life in West Java.

The needs analysis results indicate that most students perceive PAI instruction in schools as insufficiently accommodating the cultural realities and local traditions of their communities. Specifically, 60.1% stated that textbooks lack discussion of local customs, and 37.3% reported that local religious traditions are rarely taught. Furthermore, over 40% of students admitted to not understanding the legal status of certain traditions and having difficulty distinguishing which cultural practices are permissible in Islam. Conversely, 76.7% stated that they found it easier to understand religious material when it was delivered in the local language (Sundanese), highlighting the importance of a contextualized approach to teaching.

Quantitative findings on student needs were reinforced by results from classroom observations, interviews, and documentation conducted at the five public senior high schools in

West Java. Classroom observations revealed that PAI lessons still tended to be normative in nature, focusing primarily on cognitive aspects without adequately engaging with the local religious traditions that are an integral part of students' lives. For example, teachers often relied on national textbooks without relating the content to locally rooted religious practices such as *tahlilan*, *syukuran*, or *ngalap berkah* at the graves of local scholars. Learning activities seldom incorporated contextual discussions on whether such traditions are permissible within Islamic teachings.

Interview findings with students revealed a need for a deeper understanding of local religious practices. One eleventh-grade student stated, "At home, we often have communal prayer gatherings, but at school, we never discuss the ruling on them, so I'm confused about whether it's permissible in Islam or not." Another student expressed that they found it easier to understand religious sermons delivered in Sundanese at the village mosque compared to PAI lessons at school. This aligns with the quantitative finding that 76.7% of students felt that the use of local language facilitated their understanding of religious content. Interviews with PAI teachers also confirmed that there is no official module explicitly incorporating local cultural contexts into instruction, resulting in most teachers relying solely on national textbooks with general content.

Document analysis further revealed that the PAI and Character Education textbooks used in schools do not explicitly address the customs of Sundanese Muslims in practicing their faith. No explanations or case studies related to local religious traditions were found, even though these textbooks serve as the main learning resources. In addition, the reviewed lesson plans (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran* or RPP) did not include indicators or learning objectives that encourage students to critically examine or analyze local religious traditions from an Islamic perspective.

Overall, these qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative data: students require a more contextualized PAI curriculum—one that not only explains Islamic teachings in a normative manner but also equips them with critical skills and a clear understanding of the local religious practices they encounter in their daily lives.

Teacher Needs Analysis

The teacher needs analysis was conducted using questionnaires administered to senior high school (*SMA*) Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Character Education teachers. The overall score for teacher needs was 74.94%, indicating a "High" or "Required" level for the development of a local wisdom-based PAI curriculum. The details for each indicator are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Summary of Teacher Needs Analysis

Teacher Need Aspect	Percentage Agree/Strongly Agree	Brief Description of Findings
Incomplete PAI and Character Education Curriculum Documents	62,83%	Most teachers felt that the existing PAI and Character Education curriculum documents are not yet fully complete as instructional guidelines.
Need for a Contextual PAI and Character Education Curriculum Document	92,14%	Most teachers expressed a strong need for curriculum documents or instructional guides contextualized to the social conditions of West Java communities.
Need for Instructional Guides Accommodating Local Wisdom Integration	80,10%	Most teachers stated the necessity of PAI and Character Education teaching guides that accommodate the religious context in West Java.
Curriculum Documents Insufficiently Accommodate Traditions, Culture, and Religious Practices	73,82%	Most teachers felt the current curriculum documents do not adequately integrate local wisdom (culture, customs, traditions, religious practices) with positive values.
Textbook Content Insufficiently Contextual	62,30%	Most teachers felt that the main PAI and Character Education textbooks do not fully address students' needs for engaging with the societal context of West Java.

Difficulty Accessing References on Local Wisdom and PAI	41,36%	Some teachers experienced difficulties in obtaining references on religion and local wisdom for senior high school PAI instruction.
Need for Integration of Local Wisdom Examples into Teaching	88,48%	Most teachers supported integrating positive local wisdom examples into PAI and Character Education lessons to help students understand the legal status of religious behaviors in society.
Need for Clear Boundaries and Explanations of Local Customs	91,62%	Most teachers supported the need for clear boundaries, explanations, or critical reviews of local customs in West Java that relate to religion to prevent deviations.
Textbook Content Inadequately Addresses Societal Phenomena	80,63%	Most teachers felt that PAI and Character Education textbooks insufficiently cover phenomena in society related to PAI.
Existence of Religious and Cultural Disputes in Society	68,06%	Most teachers acknowledged disputes over religious and cultural issues that lead to social conflicts, particularly on social media.

The findings indicate that most senior high school PAI teachers strongly require a curriculum that is contextual and accommodating of local wisdom in West Java. They perceive the current curriculum documents and textbooks as incomplete and not fully reflective of the traditions, culture, and religious practices of the community. Teachers also reported difficulty in accessing relevant references, while strongly supporting the integration of local values into lessons as a means of bridging theoretical concepts with students' social realities. The high approval rates underscore the urgency of developing instructional guides capable of addressing the diversity and religious dynamics within society.

Quantitative findings regarding teacher needs were reinforced through qualitative methods, including classroom observations, in-depth interviews with PAI and Character Education teachers, and document analysis of curricula and teaching materials. Overall, teachers voiced consistent challenges: the absence of contextual teaching guides, a lack of relevant references, and textbooks that fail to align with the socio-religious realities of students in West Java.

Classroom observations revealed that PAI teachers tended to focus on delivering content based on nationally standardized textbooks. There was no evidence of lessons explicitly addressing or integrating local wisdom, whether in the form of case studies, discussions, or reflections on cultural values. Teachers appeared to struggle when students inquired about local religious practices—such as *sedekah bumi* (earth thanksgiving), *mapag sri* (rice harvest welcoming ritual), or *ziarah kubur* (grave visitation)—because no official references were available in the curriculum documents or textbooks. This supports the quantitative finding that 62.83% of teachers considered the curriculum documents incomplete, and 92.14% expressed the need for contextualized instructional guidelines.

Interviews with several teachers revealed deep concerns over the gap between what is taught and students' social realities. A teacher from Cirebon Regency stated, “*We often struggle to explain local practices to students. We know they exist, but there are no references, and the curriculum does not support their discussion.*” Another teacher from Sukabumi added, “*If we rely only on the textbook, students feel that the religious teachings in school are disconnected from their daily lives.*” These statements align with quantitative data, which showed that 80.63% of teachers felt textbooks do not accommodate social phenomena, and 88.48% supported the integration of local wisdom examples into PAI instruction.

Document analysis indicated that the lesson plans (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran* or RPP) and teaching modules used were largely generic and oriented toward national basic competencies. No indicators or learning activities were found that were designed to integrate local values or examine community customs. Furthermore, the latest edition of PAI and Character Education textbooks did not contain specific references to local religious practices in West Java, such as *nyekar* (grave cleaning and flower scattering), *nadran* (sea offering ritual), or *muludan* (Prophet's birthday celebration). This finding reinforces the quantitative result that 41.36% of

teachers experience difficulties obtaining local wisdom references, and that textbooks inadequately accommodate community traditions.

Teachers also voiced concern over the growing religious and cultural debates in public spaces, particularly on social media. They observed that students are exposed to conflicting narratives regarding the validity of local religious practices. One teacher noted, “*On social media, there’s a lot of misleading content labeling local traditions as bid’ah or shirk, even though they are valuable cultural practices. If schools don’t provide the correct understanding, students can be easily swayed.*” This corresponds with the quantitative finding that 68.06% of teachers acknowledged disputes leading to social divisions.

Overall, these qualitative findings confirm that teachers strongly require curricula and instructional guidelines that not only meet national standards but are also locally relevant. The absence of explicit guidance on integrating local wisdom has created confusion, pedagogical gaps, and diminished the relevance of PAI instruction within students’ socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, the development of a local wisdom-based PAI curriculum is not merely necessary but urgent, as a response to teachers’ needs in fulfilling both educational and cultural roles effectively.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum at the senior high school (*SMA*) level has not yet fully addressed the needs of students and teachers in navigating the socio-religious dynamics present in society. The main gap lies in the absence of a contextual approach that takes into account the diversity of local cultures as part of the educational process. This aligns with the *context-responsive curriculum design* approach, which emphasizes the importance of linking educational content to students’ social environments (Gay, 2018).

n-depth analysis revealed that PAI instruction remains focused on normative and textual approaches. Students generally participate in religious activities such as *pengajian* (Qur’anic recitation gatherings) or congregational prayers in a ceremonial manner, without reflective and critical engagement with Islamic teachings. (Daulay & Tobroni, 2017) stress that PAI should not merely transfer knowledge but also instill moral values and character that are applicable in students’ daily lives.

The low level of student understanding regarding the legal status of local religious traditions, coupled with their inability to distinguish between permissible and prohibited cultural practices in Islam, reflects a deficit in applied religious literacy. (Pinna, 2025) notes that cognitive dissonance arising from unclear religious norms in cultural practices can lead to anxiety, doubt, and even open pathways toward extremist views.

Data from this study show that 60% of students were uncertain about the legal status of local traditions in their communities. This is consistent with (Hidayat et al., 2020) who argue that religious law education should be incorporated into the curriculum to enhance students’ understanding of local religious practices within the framework of Islamic teachings.

Students also noted that local religious practices such as *selamatan*, *nadran*, or *tahlilan* were not discussed in PAI lessons. They perceived textbook content as irrelevant to their lived experiences. The absence of such local content contradicts the principle of *meaningful learning* emphasized by (Ausubel et al., 1968), which states that learning is more effective when new material is connected to learners’ prior experiences and contexts.

The study further found that the use of local language had a significant impact on students’ comprehension. A total of 76.7% of students stated that they understood religious

sermons more easily when delivered in Sundanese. This finding supports (Ladson-Billings, 1995) assertion that local language and symbols strengthen the connection between learners and instructional content.

From the teachers' perspective, most stated that the existing PAI curriculum documents are incomplete and lack adequate operational guidance. Fullan (2014) emphasizes that differences in perception and readiness between curriculum designers and implementers are among the main causes of educational reform failure. A total of 92.14% of teachers expressed the need for a curriculum relevant to the socio-cultural context of the community. This reflects the high demand for locally contextualized instruction, or *place-based education*, as discussed by (Gruenewald, 2003). However, teachers' limited pedagogical competence and insufficient knowledge of local culture have become significant barriers to implementing a contextual curriculum. (Arends, R.I. & Klicher, 2010; Arends, 2011) argue that curriculum innovations often fail because teachers are not provided with sufficient training and mentoring to navigate diverse learning contexts. (Darling-Hammond, 2017) also stresses that teacher effectiveness is heavily influenced by access to contextualized and ongoing professional development. In this regard, curriculum policies that are not accompanied by capacity-building programs will lead to unpreparedness among teachers in integrating local values into instruction.

Another problem identified is the lack of learning resources that reflect the diversity of local cultures. (Banks, 2008) states that to achieve culturally responsive teaching, learning materials must reflect students' lived experiences so that they feel valued and emotionally connected to the learning process. In fact, local religious practices such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), *muludan* (Prophet's birthday celebrations), or *ziarah kubur* (grave visitation) contain universal values such as solidarity and sincerity. When integrated into instruction, these values can serve as scaffolding for deeper religious understanding, as explained in (Vygotsky, 1978) constructivist theory.

The *Merdeka Curriculum* in principle offers significant opportunities for pedagogical innovation and flexibility. However, this potential has not been fully realized, as some teachers lack the confidence or resources to develop contextual learning approaches (Sleeter, 2011). The absence of technical regulations governing the integration of local wisdom also serves as a major obstacle. In fact, policies such as Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation No. 56/M/2022 on the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* could serve as an entry point for designing contextually and culturally grounded religious education (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Teachers' concerns over the rise of religious and cultural debates on social media highlight the importance of strengthening religious moderation values through education. Azra (2019) emphasizes that religious education should cultivate an open, tolerant, and contextually aware religious attitude toward societal realities. Integrating local wisdom into religious instruction can enhance functional religious literacy. As outlined in the Religious Literacy Framework. (D. L. Moore, 2015; J. L. Moore et al., 2011) sound religious understanding must account for the social and historical contexts in which religious practices occur. Contextual religious instruction is also believed to foster an inclusive and adaptive religious identity. In a multicultural society like Indonesia, this forms a crucial foundation for achieving long-term social cohesion (Sofjan, 2020).

In light of these findings, it can be concluded that the future development of the PAI curriculum must be not only normative but also applicative and contextual. This entails preparing culturally grounded instructional guidelines, developing alternative textbooks, providing

comprehensive teacher training, and implementing affirmative policies from the government. Without concrete and systematic action, religious education will remain disconnected from social realities and fail to address contemporary challenges. Therefore, the reform of the PAI curriculum based on local wisdom is not merely a necessity but a strategic imperative to shape a generation of religiously committed individuals who are contextually aware and culturally rooted

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the development of the *Merdeka Curriculum* for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) grounded in local wisdom is an urgent necessity to address the challenges of socio-religious diversity in Indonesia, particularly in West Java. The gap between normative instructional content and the cultural practices embedded in communities has created confusion among students and pedagogical limitations among teachers. The needs analysis involving both students and teachers revealed that the majority recognize the importance of integrating local values—such as religious traditions and regional languages—into PAI instruction. A curriculum that is responsive to local contexts is believed to foster an inclusive religious identity, strengthen a moderate understanding of Islam, and promote social cohesion in a multicultural society. Therefore, curriculum development must be based on a comprehensive needs analysis and supported by appropriate policies, learning resources, and teacher training so that religious education becomes more relevant, adaptive, and meaningful.

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