

Innovation in the Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in Elementary Schools within the Context of the Merdeka Curriculum and 21st-Century Skills

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Accepted: 10 Maret 2026	reviewed: 5 April 2026	Published: 20 May 2026
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Abstract. This research aims to explore forms of curriculum innovation in Islamic Education (PAI) at elementary schools (SD) in response to the challenges of the 21st century and the implementation of Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum). Employing a descriptive qualitative approach based on a literature study, the author analyzes various academic sources related to innovative and contextual strategies, educational theories, and instructional practices within Islamic Education. Findings indicate that curriculum innovations in PAI at the elementary level encompass integrating Islamic values into cross-disciplinary approaches, applying project-based learning strategies, utilizing digital technology, and adopting local arts and cultural approaches. Additionally, constructivism theory, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and progressive educational values form the basis for designing student-centered learning. The PAI curriculum at elementary schools is expected not only to shape students' character and spirituality but also equip them with essential 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. Such innovations are crucial for creating enjoyable, meaningful, and real-life relevant learning experiences for elementary students, while also fostering active student engagement, enhancing their intrinsic motivation, and optimally developing learning flexibility and autonomy.

Keywords: Curriculum Innovation; Islamic Religious Education; Elementary School; Merdeka Curriculum; 21st Century

Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Indonesia plays an important role in developing students' character and moral values, particularly at the elementary school level. At this important stage of development, the internalization of religious and moral values becomes a strong foundation for shaping children's personalities. The IRE curriculum in elementary schools is not only intended to provide students with theoretical knowledge of Islamic teachings, but also to develop their ability to apply these values in everyday life. This includes moral, spiritual, and social aspects that are essential for students' overall development. (Bustari et al., 2024).

Despite its vital role in shaping students' character, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the elementary school level still faces a number of challenges. One of the main challenges is that IRE teaching often remains dominated by conventional approaches that emphasize memorization, pay limited attention to the contextual realities of students' lives, and are less responsive to changing educational needs and contemporary developments. (Azima dkk, 2025). In addition, teaching approaches that tend to be one-way and lack innovation in the delivery of learning materials also pose a significant challenge to creating an interactive and engaging learning environment for students. (Saputri & Kamil, 2024).

In response to these challenges, an adaptive and flexible curriculum has become increasingly important in creating more meaningful learning experiences. The integration of technology,

contextual learning approaches, and the development of learning materials that are relevant to students' socio-cultural backgrounds and current technological developments offer promising alternatives for improving the quality of Islamic Religious Education. (Indarta et al., 2022). In response to the rapidly changing dynamics of contemporary society, the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level often faces difficulties in keeping pace with ongoing social and cultural changes, as well as continuous technological advancements. (Marzuqi & Ahid, 2023).

The realities observed in schools indicate that limited technology integration, insufficient use of local cultural contexts, and the continued reliance on conventional pedagogical approaches remain major obstacles to making the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum relevant and transformative for students living in an increasingly digital and multicultural era (Abas & Supi'ah, 2025). Limited technology integration, low levels of media literacy among teachers, and the underutilization of local culture as a learning resource also hinder the creation of a dynamic, enjoyable, and meaningful learning environment (Ervianti et al., 2023).

To address these challenges, relevant educational theories, including Jean Piaget's constructivism, Lev Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), John Dewey's progressive educational principles, and Hasan Langgulung's perspectives on Islamic education, provide an important foundation for designing an innovative curriculum. Jean Piaget views children as active learners who gradually construct meaning in accordance with their stages of cognitive development (Marinda, 2020). This means that Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning materials should be adapted to students' age and level of cognitive development by using concrete and visual methods, such as Islamic stories, role-playing activities, simulations of religious practices, and the exploration of Islamic values through everyday experiences (Rawanita & Jannah, 2025). Through this approach, Islamic Religious Education can become more engaging, contextual, and easier for students to understand.

The relevance of the constructivist approach to the development of the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level can also be seen in the importance of dialogical and participatory learning that connects religious knowledge with the social realities encountered by students in their daily lives (Muzfirah dkk, 2023). Thus, a constructivist-based Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum can encourage students not only to understand Islamic teachings cognitively but also to internalize these values in their attitudes and everyday actions. In the context of IRE, this means that religious learning should be adapted to the cognitive developmental stages of elementary school students, for example through storytelling, simulations of religious practices, and visual learning activities (Jasuri, 2015).

Lev Vygotsky emphasized the importance of sociocultural interaction in the learning process. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the need for scaffolding, or gradual guidance from teachers, including in the delivery of religious values through contextual and dialogical learning. Within this framework, innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level can be directed toward more active, participatory, and reflective learning, replacing repetitive approaches that are less connected to students' real-life contexts (Margolis, 2020).

Dewey argued that the curriculum should be designed based on students' needs, interests, and experiences, while remaining closely connected to real-life situations. In the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the elementary school level, this means that Islamic values should be linked to students' social realities, such as practicing honesty in daily life, developing tolerance, and showing concern for the environment. Learning should therefore be contextual and encourage students' active participation through activities such as religious projects, discussions, and direct practice of worship and moral conduct. The Merdeka Curriculum itself reflects several principles of progressivism, particularly its flexibility, student-centered orientation, and relevance to local

contexts (Nanggalaupi & Suryadi, 2021).

These approaches are highly relevant to the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, which provides Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers with greater flexibility to design learning plans that are adaptive, contextual, and student-centered (Siregar et al., 2024). Through the implementation of differentiated learning principles, teachers are given greater opportunities to accommodate differences in students' learning styles, interests, and readiness in understanding Islamic values (Wibowo dkk, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum encourages teachers to move beyond the role of simply delivering learning materials and to act as facilitators who guide students in constructing knowledge through meaningful learning experiences (Putri & Amelia, 2024).

The curriculum is an essential element of education and can be understood as a structured program designed to guide students' learning. The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum is developed to integrate spiritual, moral, and social dimensions through contextual and practical approaches. More broadly, Islamic Religious Education can be viewed as an educational system that guides human life in accordance with Islamic teachings, enabling individuals to pursue peace and well-being throughout their lives (Arifudin dkk, 2024).

Science and technology play an important role in the development of the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum so that it remains relevant to contemporary changes. The integration of scientific and technological perspectives into the IRE curriculum at the elementary school level aims to prepare students to face global challenges by equipping them with technological competence and relevant knowledge. At the same time, the IRE curriculum is expected to develop individuals who are intellectually capable while maintaining strong integrity in modern society (Ulhusni & Hamami, 2024).

This study aims to identify and analyze various forms of innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level that are relevant to local contexts and the demands of 21st-century education. It also seeks to identify the factors that influence the successful implementation of curriculum innovation in IRE at the elementary school level. Academically, this study is expected to contribute to the development of theories and practices related to innovative and contextual IRE curricula. In practical terms, the findings may serve as a reference for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing and implementing IRE curricula that are responsive to changing educational needs and contemporary developments. In addition, this study is expected to support improvements in the quality of IRE learning through approaches that are more relevant, participatory, and student-centered (Bella Sar, 2024).

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a literature review method. This approach was selected because it is appropriate for exploring in depth various concepts, findings, and perspectives that have been discussed in previous scholarly works (Sugiyono, 2018). The purpose of this method is to examine, critically review, and synthesize relevant scholarly literature on innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level, with particular attention to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the challenges of 21st-century education.

This review is not merely intended to collect descriptive information, but also to develop a comprehensive theoretical understanding of how the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level can be developed in an innovative, contextual, and adaptive manner in response to contemporary changes. Therefore, the findings of this study are expected to provide a conceptual foundation for formulating more progressive and transformative educational strategies and policies.

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design aimed at systematically, critically, and comprehensively describing various ideas, concepts, and findings presented in the scholarly literature (Moleong, L, 2019). This approach allows the researcher to explore and interpret the data reflectively without relying on statistical analysis, making it more appropriate for understanding the dynamics of innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level.

The data sources used in this study include scholarly journal articles, laws and regulations related to educational policies, as well as previous research findings relevant to the topic under study. Therefore, this study not only presents factual information but also provides analytical insights that may serve as both theoretical and practical foundations for developing an Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level that is responsive to contemporary changes.

Data were collected through a literature search using academic databases and research tools such as Google Scholar, Consensus, and Publish or Perish. These sources were selected because they provide access to a wide range of credible and up-to-date scholarly publications at both national and international levels. The literature search was conducted using keywords relevant to the research topic. Through this strategy, the study is expected to be supported by a strong theoretical and empirical foundation and to maintain academic credibility.

The data were analyzed using content analysis, which was employed to systematically and objectively examine the content of the collected literature. The analysis began by assessing the relevance of each source to the focus and objectives of the study, particularly those related to innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum and the challenges of 21st-century education.

The analysis is expected to provide a basis for formulating recommendations that can be applied by educators, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers. Accordingly, the content analysis employed in this study is not merely descriptive but also interpretative and reflective, thereby supporting the development of a more relevant and transformative IRE curriculum.

Result and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the reviewed literature, several important findings were identified regarding innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level, particularly within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum and the demands of 21st-century education. These findings are as follows:

1. Paradigm Shift in the Islamic Religious Education Curriculum at the Elementary School Level in the Merdeka Curriculum Era

The paradigm of the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level in the Merdeka Curriculum era has shifted toward a more humanistic, contextual, and digitally oriented form of education with a stronger emphasis on character development. However, its implementation still faces challenges, particularly in terms of teacher readiness and school infrastructure (A. Ghani et al., 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the importance of student-centered learning, character development, and contextual learning (Baro'ah et al., 2023).

In the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), curriculum innovation is reflected in the adaptation of learning materials to make them more contextual and relevant to students' everyday realities. It is also evident in the integration of Islamic values into interdisciplinary learning activities (Denico, 2024). Project-based learning approaches can also be implemented through religiously oriented projects, such as social activities grounded in Islamic values.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology reported that more than 70% of elementary schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum had adjusted the content and instructional methods of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) to promote more active and participatory learning. However, shifting the teacher's role from a knowledge provider to a learning facilitator remains a major challenge. Limited training and teachers' insufficient understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum continue to be among the main obstacles to its effective implementation (Rohmawan & Fattah, 2024).

In the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays a more active role in shaping the Pancasila Student Profile by fostering faith, mutual cooperation, independence, and respect for diversity through relevant learning materials and instructional approaches (Afriliya, 2024). The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level is increasingly directed toward addressing contemporary challenges by maintaining a balance between religious and general knowledge and by promoting an interdisciplinary approach to learning (Irawan, 2024).

The Merdeka Curriculum encourages more authentic assessment in Islamic Religious Education (IRE), which evaluates not only cognitive aspects but also students' affective and moral dimensions (*amaliyah*) in order to reflect the application of Islamic values in everyday practice (Mughni, 2023). The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level is increasingly directed toward emphasizing the values of tolerance, empathy, and justice, in line with the Merdeka Curriculum's mission to develop students' character in a more inclusive manner and to strengthen their understanding of the diverse social and cultural realities of Indonesian society (Bustari et al., 2024).

The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) textbook for fourth-grade elementary school students under the Merdeka Curriculum incorporates several principles of child education proposed by Abdullah Nashih 'Ulwan, including spiritual, social, and intellectual development. These principles reinforce the transformation of the curriculum toward a more holistic approach to character education (Zulfa & Zuhriyah, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum has transformed the paradigm of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) into a more flexible, character-centered, and adaptive approach that is responsive to contemporary developments.

2. Innovative Strategies for Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Learning in Elementary Schools

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the elementary school level plays an important role in shaping students' character, religious values, and spiritual attitudes from an early age (Azzahra et al., 2025). However, in response to contemporary developments and the challenges of 21st-century education, learning strategies need to be not only effective but also innovative. These strategies are intended to make Islamic Religious Education (IRE)

more engaging, contextual, and meaningful for students while encouraging their active participation in the learning process.

Islamic Religious Education at the elementary school level is not merely concerned with the transfer of knowledge, but also with the development of students' character and spiritual attitudes (Cahyani & Masyithoh, 2023). Therefore, innovative learning strategies are essential to ensure that the learning process remains engaging and is able to address students' affective development (Dilonia, Ananda; Melki & Gusmaneli, 2025). Innovation is needed to bridge contemporary educational demands with the essential spiritual values of Islam.

Traditional approaches, such as lectures and memorization, are still widely used in many elementary schools. As a result, students tend to be less active and show limited emotional and cognitive engagement in the learning process. Rosyad's study indicates that conventional teaching methods often fail to stimulate students' interest in learning Islamic Religious Education (IRE) (Rosyad, 2019).

Various innovative strategies for Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning at the elementary school level have been identified in the literature. One example is the *art in education* approach, which draws inspiration from local cultural heritage, such as *Batik Rifa'iyah*. This approach can increase students' enthusiasm and help them understand religious values through visual and contextual learning media (Mahardhika et al., 2022). As a result of the pandemic, online learning media have proven to improve access to and flexibility in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning. However, teaching methods and learning content need to be adapted to ensure that the learning process remains engaging for students (Budianto & Mukhsin, 2021).

One innovative strategy that can be applied is Project-Based Learning (PjBL), which encourages students to complete projects based on Islamic values such as mutual assistance and honesty. This model makes learning more contextual and practical, as demonstrated by Zahra and Yasin in their study involving fifth-grade elementary school students (Zahra & Yasin, 2024). The use of role-playing strategies has also proven effective in bringing Islamic moral values to life in the learning process. Rasyid showed that this strategy can enhance students' understanding of values and emotional engagement through simulations of real-life situations that are consistent with Islamic teachings (Rasyid, 2020).

The guided inquiry model also provides students with opportunities to actively explore religious concepts. Ahmad noted that students became more critical and independent when seeking answers to Islamic-related topics through discussion and observation (A. A. Nasution, 2023). In the context of digitalization, the use of educational applications such as Quizizz and Google Classroom can serve as effective alternatives for supporting Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning. Asrori found that a Quizizz-based mastery learning strategy improved both students' learning outcomes and their participation in Islamic Religious Education at the elementary school level (Aryaputra et al., 2024).

Elementary school students are generally very responsive to visual learning. Therefore, interactive comic media based on the discovery learning approach, as developed by Untari, offer an innovative solution for teaching abstract concepts such as *iman* and *ihسان* in a way that is enjoyable and easy for students to understand (Nafi'ah et al., 2024). In a diverse society, a multicultural approach that respects diversity within the context of Islamic

Religious Education (IRE) is essential. Fajri demonstrated that multicultural-based IRE learning can foster tolerance, moderation, and a sense of nationalism among students from an early age (Fajri et al., 2024). Cooperative learning strategies train students to work collaboratively while learning Islamic values such as *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) and *musyawarah* (deliberation). This model has been shown to be effective in improving students' social interaction and learning achievement in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) (Sinambela et al., 2022).

An integrative strategy that connects Islamic Religious Education (IRE) with other subjects, such as arts, language, and science, can strengthen students' understanding of Islamic teachings and their relevance to real-life contexts (Y. Nasution, 2024). Value-based learning strategies explicitly emphasize the values of honesty, responsibility, and empathy in students' everyday classroom activities (Habibu, 2020). Value-based learning promotes a deeper internalization of Islamic character values among students (Noviani & Zainuddin, 2020). Innovative strategies in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the elementary school level should be contextual, engaging, and capable of addressing students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions (Zubair, 2024). Teachers need to be empowered through continuous training and technological support so that they can implement learning strategies that are relevant to the needs of today's students.

3. Alignment of the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Curriculum in Elementary Schools with 21st-Century Skills

In the era of globalization and digitalization, education is increasingly expected to prepare a generation that is not only intellectually capable, but also adaptable, collaborative, creative, and strong in character. Although Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the elementary school level remains focused on spiritual and moral values, it is also expected to contribute to the development of human resources who are faithful, morally responsible, and intellectually capable as Muslim learners. In the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, the Islamic Religious Education curriculum needs to be continuously adjusted so that its content remains relevant to current conditions and supports the development of skills required in a rapidly changing world (Ul haq & Hamami, 2020).

Modern religious education faces significant challenges arising from rapid technological advancement and changes in the socio-cultural environment. One of its major tasks is to improve the quality of religious education and ensure the effectiveness of religious learning at the elementary school level. The use of technology in disseminating knowledge has become increasingly important, particularly in supporting competency development and adaptation to the demands of contemporary society. Digital educational resources have also been recognized as an effective means of strengthening the professional orientation of future religious educators. Therefore, integrating digital technology into the educational process is essential for improving educational quality and developing students' competencies (Munawati, 2024).

The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level essentially aims to instill sound *aqidah* (faith), good moral conduct, and proper religious practices in children. However, in the contemporary context, the curriculum needs to be further developed to equip students with the ability to apply Islamic values when responding

to the challenges of modern life. The 21st century is characterized by the digital revolution, a knowledge-based economy, and the growing pressures of globalization. As a form of value-based education, IRE should therefore develop students' life skills rather than focus solely on mastery of subject content. This requires a transformation in both pedagogical approaches and curriculum design. Problem-Based Learning (PBL), for example, can be effectively implemented in IRE to develop students' critical thinking skills in addressing socio-religious issues such as tolerance, justice, and social responsibility (Hidayati et al., 2024).

Collaboration, as one of the key pillars of 21st-century skills, is consistent with the Islamic value of *ukhuwah islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood). The implementation of cooperative learning strategies, such as the *jigsaw* method, in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) can strengthen mutual cooperation and respect among students while helping to prevent the development of radical attitudes (Ibda et al., 2024). The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level promotes ethical communication through the teaching of *akhlak* (morality) and *adab* (proper conduct). By integrating group discussions and presentations into the learning process, students are trained to express their ideas politely and responsibly.

Creativity can be developed through integrative projects, such as designing *da'wah* posters, producing Islamic-themed vlogs, or writing poems on moral values. These strategies combine religious values with artistic expression and the use of technology (Nurmajidah, 2024). Digital literacy has become increasingly important in Islamic Religious Education (IRE), particularly in educating students to use the internet responsibly. IRE teachers can guide students in evaluating the credibility of Islamic content and in avoiding religious misinformation and hoaxes (Mustakim et al., 2021).

Elementary school students have diverse learning characteristics. Therefore, the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum in the 21st century should incorporate differentiated learning to enable students to understand Islamic teachings in ways that suit their individual learning styles and needs. Skills such as empathy, self-control, and honesty are also integral components of IRE learning. These soft skills are essential for developing students who are resilient, ethical, and socially responsible, while also helping to prevent bullying at the elementary school level (Rahmat et al., 2023).

The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level can be integrated with other subjects. For example, it can be connected with Indonesian language learning through the writing of Islamic short stories, with science through discussions on environmental ethics, and with mathematics through logical reasoning related to zakat and inheritance. This interdisciplinary approach is consistent with the spirit of 21st-century education. The alignment of IRE with 21st-century skills is also reflected in its assessment practices. Assessment should therefore include students' learning processes, learning products, and self-reflection in order to capture the achievement of character development and soft skills more comprehensively (Hidayatullah, 2023).

4. Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Curriculum Innovation at the Elementary School Level

The implementation of the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level now faces new challenges in response to the growing demands for educational innovation in the digital and global era (Wahid & Hamami, 2021). The curriculum is no longer focused solely on memorization and moral character development, but is also expected to prepare a generation that is religious, adaptive, and capable of critical thinking (Pradika, 2020). Based on these considerations, curriculum reform through innovative approaches has become an urgent necessity. However, this process inevitably involves various opportunities and challenges that need to be examined in depth.

Curriculum innovation often emerges in response to situational constraints, as was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic created opportunities for elementary school teachers and students to develop technological skills, expand access to learning, and make use of a wider range of learning resources. At the same time, however, online learning during the pandemic also presented several challenges, including difficulties in achieving learning objectives, unstable internet connectivity, and the relatively high costs associated with online learning (Hartono, 2022).

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia significantly changed the delivery of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the elementary school level. During the pandemic, learning was conducted online in accordance with government policies and official instructions, while face-to-face classes were temporarily suspended. This situation required IRE teachers to design and manage learning activities by utilizing various digital applications so that the learning process could continue effectively (Rahayu & Taufik Bk, 2022).

The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level has undergone significant changes through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These changes provide teachers with greater opportunities to design creative learning activities that align with the Pancasila Student Profile and the development of 21st-century skills (Mughni, 2023). One of the main challenges in implementing innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level is teacher readiness. Many teachers are still unfamiliar with active and digital learning methods; therefore, continuous professional development and training are essential.

In carrying out their professional responsibilities, teachers need a strong moral and spiritual foundation, which can be reinforced through the study of *tafsir tarbawi* (educational interpretation of the Qur'an). Values such as honesty, trustworthiness, and exemplary conduct can be strengthened through a deeper understanding of *tafsir tarbawi*. However, limited teacher understanding and the lack of teaching materials based on *tafsir tarbawi* remain significant challenges. Therefore, training and the integration of *tafsir tarbawi* into the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level are highly necessary (Mirza & Saadah, 2025).

Another challenge is the limited availability of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure in many elementary schools, particularly in underdeveloped areas. This condition hampers the implementation of digital-based innovations that ideally should be integrated into the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum. In addition, the IRE curriculum at the elementary school level often remains focused on ritual and

theoretical aspects and has not yet fully incorporated contemporary issues such as tolerance, environmental awareness, and digitalization (Dirgahayu et al., 2025). The high administrative workload placed on teachers also becomes a barrier to the development of innovative teaching methods. Time that could otherwise be used to explore and improve learning practices is often consumed by administrative responsibilities (Y. I. Al Ghani et al., 2023).

The Merdeka Curriculum provides significant opportunities for Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers to innovate through project-based and thematic learning. This approach is consistent with Islamic values that emphasize good character, cooperation, and mutual assistance (Efendi et al., 2022). Collaboration among schools, teacher communities, and parents can further strengthen innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level. Such collaboration has been shown to enrich ideas, broaden perspectives, and improve teaching and learning practices (Aulia, 2025).

Social media platforms such as YouTube and podcasts have been used by some Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers as a means of delivering Islamic values through narrative and visual approaches (Noviani & Zainuddin, 2020). The Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) model enables Islamic Religious Education (IRE) to be directly connected with students' everyday lives. At the elementary school level, this model can be implemented through activities such as charity projects, sharing activities, and Islamic-themed drama performances.

Another opportunity lies in teachers' ability to integrate Islamic values with national competency indicators. This integration can enrich the meaning of learning while remaining aligned with established curriculum standards (Ahmad Rudi Alpata, Rahmadan, 2024). Innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level has the potential to increase students' learning motivation by making the learning process more engaging, participatory, and meaningful (Diba & Muhid, 2022).

Innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level also reflects a glocalization approach, in which global values are adapted to local contexts that are rooted in Islamic and Indonesian perspectives. The curriculum should respond to the needs of society, both in the present and in the future. Therefore, schools need to design curricula that are closely connected to social realities, recognizing that students are part of society and will eventually return to and contribute to their communities after completing their education (Marzuki & Yusuf, 2019).

The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level needs to adapt to contemporary changes, including developments in artificial intelligence, technology, creativity, and the future world of work. The teaching of moral values and religious practices should therefore be connected to current social and technological realities. Contextual learning approaches are effective in deepening students' understanding of Islamic values while also strengthening the teacher's role as a facilitator. Case studies have shown that this approach can be successfully implemented in various educational settings, making it valuable for the development of more relevant and responsive IRE learning strategies (Mahrus, 2024). Another challenge is the limited use of reflection-based assessment. Some teachers still rely on conventional evaluation methods rather than using portfolios or process-based observation (Mughni, 2023).

Conclusion

Innovation in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum at the elementary school level has become an urgent need in the era of digital disruption, globalization, and increasingly complex social dynamics. The Merdeka Curriculum provides greater opportunities for educational transformation, particularly in developing IRE learning that is more flexible, contextual, and oriented toward character development and 21st-century skills. Curriculum innovation in IRE is not limited to updating learning content, but also involves changes in educational paradigms, pedagogical approaches, and the integration of Islamic values into various aspects of students' lives.

The findings of this review indicate that innovative approaches such as Project-Based Learning, role-playing, guided inquiry, and the use of digital media can significantly enhance students' engagement in the learning process. The integration of Islamic values with art, local culture, and technology also makes IRE more contextual and meaningful. In addition, the IRE curriculum at the elementary school level is increasingly directed toward strengthening the 4C skills critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity which are essential for developing a generation of Muslims who are not only religiously grounded but also adaptive to contemporary changes

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