

THE TRANSFORMATION OF ISLAMIC VALUES-BASED EDUCATION MANAGEMENT: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM AND THE ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP PARADIGM IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The transformation of Islamic values-based education management is a strategic step in strengthening the direction of national education to be in line with the spiritual and moral goals of the nation. This study aims to critically analyse how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum can be integrated with the principles of Islamic education management, as well as how the Islamic leadership paradigm plays a role in the transformation process. Through library research, this study examines various scientific sources in the form of books, journals, and official documents relevant to the theme of Islamic education management and the Merdeka Curriculum policy. The results of the study show that the Merdeka Curriculum, with its principles of flexibility and independence, is in line with Islamic values such as tauhid, amanah, adil, and ihsan, which emphasise a balance between intellectual and moral intelligence. Meanwhile, the Islamic leadership paradigm based on the values of shiddiq, amanah, tabligh, and fathanah is an important factor in directing the transformation of education management to be character-building, visionary, and oriented towards the benefit of the people. The synergy between the Merdeka Curriculum and Islamic leadership produces a holistic, competitive, and spirituality-based educational management model, capable of producing a generation that is knowledgeable, moral, and adaptive to the developments of the times.

Keywords: Islamic education management, Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic leadership, educational transformation, Islamic values.

Introduction

The paradigm shift in education in Indonesia continues to experience significant dynamics, especially in facing the era of globalisation and the 5.0 industrial revolution, which demands synergy between intellectual, emotional, and spiritual intelligence. Education is no longer merely understood as a process of knowledge transfer, but as a strategic instrument for shaping the character of human beings who are ethical, creative, and independent (Renyaan et al., 2025); (Komari et al., 2025). In this context, educational management as the main driving force of educational institutions plays an important role in determining policy direction and learning quality (R. Al-Farisi, 2019). However, the transformation of educational management needs to be directed towards values that are

not only technocratic but also moral and spiritual, so that it can respond to the challenges of the dehumanisation of modern education, which is becoming increasingly materialistic.

One of Indonesia's major education policies that marks a paradigm shift is the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum is expected to provide more flexible, learner-centred learning that is oriented towards character development and 21st-century competencies. However, in its application, the Merdeka Curriculum is often understood as merely a technical and methodological innovation, without touching on the substance of the spiritual values that form the moral foundation of the nation (Nasution & Aslan, 2025); (Aslan & Nur, 2025). However, in the context of national education, which is rich in religious values, especially Islam as the majority religion, the curriculum should be able to serve as a vehicle for integrating science, moral values, and religious teachings.

Islamic education actually offers a management and curriculum paradigm based on the values of monotheism, trustworthiness, justice, and benevolence. These values emphasise that all educational activities, including planning, organising, implementing, and evaluating, must be based on the principles of devotion to Allah and the benefit of humanity. Upon closer examination, these principles are in line with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, which seeks to develop individual potential to the maximum through human-centred education (R. Al-Farisi, 2019). Therefore, efforts to contextualise the Merdeka Curriculum within the perspective of Islamic values are a strategic step towards strengthening the direction of national education that is character-based and has integrity.

Education management from an Islamic perspective does not only focus on organisational effectiveness and human resource efficiency, but also on spiritual, ethical, and moral responsibility aspects. School principals, teachers, and educational staff are not only seen as administrative actors, but also as moral leaders who instil Islamic values in every policy and action. Thus, the transformation of Islamic value-based educational management is a comprehensive process that includes reforming structures, organisational culture, and leadership orientation to remain grounded in the principles of spirituality and justice (. The presence of the Merdeka Curriculum provides an important momentum for Islamic educational institutions to strengthen their identity and scientific orientation. Through the flexibility offered by this curriculum, educational institutions have more space to integrate Islamic teachings into interdisciplinary learning, whether through materials, methods, or evaluation. For example, the concept of the Pancasila Student Profile in the Merdeka Curriculum can be synergised with the Islamic concept of insan kamil, in which students are expected to grow into individuals who are balanced in their intellect, heart, and behaviour. This kind of integration requires innovative educational management that is committed to Islamic values relevant to the challenges of the times (Aslan & Arifudin, 2025).

In an institutional context, the transformation of Islamic educational management requires visionary, participatory leadership based on Qur'anic values. Leadership in Islam is not authoritative power, but rather a mandate that must be carried out with full responsibility. This is in line with the concept of khalifah in the Qur'an, where every leader

has the duty to maintain, regulate, and uphold justice in the environment they lead. With this paradigm, school principals or heads of educational institutions are expected to be role models in building an organisational culture that is fair, productive, and oriented towards serving the entire school community (K. A. Latif, 2019).

A gap that often arises in educational practice in Indonesia is the weak integration between national curriculum policies and Islamic values in their implementation in the field. Many Islamic educational institutions still focus on the cognitive transmission of religious knowledge but have not developed systematic management to internalise these values in all aspects of school life. As a result, the transformations that occur are often partial and unsustainable (N. H. Yusuf, 2023). In this context, a management approach based on Islamic values is needed to ensure that every educational policy and activity is in line with the mission of character building and noble morals.

Studies on Islamic value-based educational management transformation are becoming increasingly relevant in the era of digital disruption, which demands rapid adaptation without losing one's identity. Technology, while opening up great opportunities for innovation in learning, also brings challenges in the form of a decline in human values, such as moral degradation, individualism, and a loss of spiritual meaning. Therefore, education managed according to Islamic principles can serve as a bastion of values and ethics, guiding students to be able to utilise technological advances productively and with dignity (S. H. Ahmad, 2019).

Theoretically, the concept of Islamic-based educational management transformation has a strong foundation in various modern management theories, particularly those related to transformative leadership, value-based management, and character education. Islam provides a comprehensive value framework that not only regulates human relationships with God, but also with fellow human beings and the social environment (Hifza, Suhardi, et al., 2020). Thus, this transformation is not only organisational in nature, but also transformative in the sense that it changes mindsets, work culture, and educational orientation towards a balance between the worldly and the hereafter. Meanwhile, from a practical perspective, the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic educational institutions depends heavily on the extent to which leaders and educators are able to integrate spiritual values into the managerial process. Every management activity, from strategic planning and decision-making to evaluation, needs to be directed towards creating education that is oriented towards moral and social welfare. This is what distinguishes the Islamic education management paradigm from secular models, which tend to place efficiency and productivity as the main objectives without considering the dimension of spirituality.

Research Method

The research method used in this study is library research, in which data and information are collected through searching, reviewing, and analysis of relevant scientific literature sources, such as books, journal articles, official curriculum documents, and

previous research results discussing Islamic education management, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, and the Islamic leadership paradigm (Eliyah & Aslan, 2025) . A critical analysis was conducted on the theories, concepts, and findings in the literature to obtain an in-depth understanding and systematic synthesis related to the integration of Islamic values in the transformation of education management and curriculum implementation. With this approach, the research focused on constructing arguments based on secondary data to produce empirical, logical, and scientific findings and recommendations (Ferrari, 2020) .

Results and Discussion

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum from an Islamic Education Management Perspective

The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced in response to the increasingly complex and dynamic needs of the education sector in the face of globalisation, digital technology, and social disruption. This curriculum emphasises the principles of flexibility, independence, and learner-centred learning by highlighting three main pillars, namely differentiation, relevance, and adaptability. These principles are highly relevant to the demands of modern education, which requires freedom of thought and creativity in the learning process (Aslan & Wahyudin, 2020) . However, when viewed from an Islamic perspective, freedom in education is not absolute but is bound by moral, ethical, and spiritual values derived from the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Thus, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic educational institutions needs to be directed so that learning independence remains grounded in the principles of tawhid and social responsibility (S. H. Ahmad, 2019) .

Islamic education management views the educational process as a trust (amanah) that must be carried out with full responsibility and the intention of worship. Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic institutions cannot be done solely based on a technocratic approach, but must be accompanied by spiritual and moral awareness. In this case, the principal acts as a leader who ensures that curriculum policies are formulated, implemented, and evaluated in accordance with Islamic values. Every managerial decision must be based on the principles of justice ('adl), wisdom (hikmah), and benefit (maslahah), so that the goal of education is not merely to produce cognitively intelligent individuals, but also individuals with good character (O. M. Yasin, 2020) .

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires a transformation of the educational organisation's culture to be more open to innovation and collaboration. In the context of Islamic-based institutions, this transformation must be rooted in the values of sincerity (ikhlas) and collective responsibility (takaful). Teachers do not only play the role of educators, but also as murabbi (educators who guide morals) who instil Islamic values in every learning process (Sitopu et al., 2024) . Curriculum planning must also pay attention to the balance between academic and spiritual aspects, so that project-based learning or

the Pancasila Student profile can be contextualised through activities that strengthen the values of faith, worship, and social ethics (O. M. Yasin, 2020).

Within the framework of Islamic education management, the planning function is not only oriented towards the preparation of work programmes and curriculum documents, but also encompasses the intentions and strategic direction of the institution based on divine values. An Islamic education manager needs to ensure that the educational objectives formulated in the Merdeka Curriculum are in accordance with maqasid al-syariah, namely the protection of religion, reason, soul, offspring, and property. This means that every learning policy should be directed at creating human beings who are balanced between worldly and spiritual needs. This approach can prevent the dichotomy between general knowledge and religious knowledge, which has long been a classic problem in the Indonesian education system (L. Dewi, 2023).

The implementation (organising) of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic educational institutions requires a participatory, open, and communicative organisational structure. Every educator and educational staff member needs to understand their role in implementing the curriculum as part of their professional duties. Collective leadership based on deliberation (shura) is important to ensure that every curriculum innovation is not decided top-down, but through the active involvement of the entire school community. The principle of shura ensures agreements rooted in the values of justice and moral responsibility, as well as creating a sense of ownership of educational goals. Together (Irwan et al., 2024) ; (Aslan, 2019) . In the learning implementation stage, teachers, as the main implementers of the Merdeka Curriculum, must be able to integrate Islamic values into every learning activity without having to change the substance of the national curriculum. For example, in the Pancasila student profile project activity, the value of mutual cooperation can be reinforced with the concept of ukhuwah Islamiyah, while student exploration and creativity activities can be directed towards fostering gratitude and awareness of Allah's greatness. Reinforcing values such as this makes learning more meaningful and spiritual, rather than focusing solely on academic results (A. Rahman, 2021).

The evaluation system in the Merdeka Curriculum, which is based on process and holistic learning outcomes, is also consistent with the Islamic evaluation system. In Islam, the assessment of human beings does not only cover results, but also intentions and efforts (R. Fitriani, 2022) . Therefore, learning evaluation in Islamic educational institutions needs to integrate moral and character assessment into student achievement rubrics. Teachers can utilise Islamic values reflection as part of formative assessment, so that students are trained to introspect and understand the meaning of learning as worship.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum within an Islamic framework also requires human resource development strategies oriented towards work spirituality. Educational institutions need to hold training and workshops that not only equip teachers with pedagogical competencies, but also with managerial skills and an understanding of Islamic values (Aslan et al., 2020) . Thus, educators will be better prepared to become

agents of change who are able to manage learning innovatively without losing their moral and religious foundations. The flexibility provided by the Merdeka Curriculum in terms of school curriculum development (Operational Curriculum for Education Units/KOSP) can be utilised to strengthen the distinctive characteristics of Islamic education. Schools or madrasahs can adapt the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum by adding activities that reflect the values of faith, morals, and religious social values. For example, projects to strengthen student profiles can be directed towards social da'wah activities, sharia entrepreneurship, or Al-Qur'an literacy, which are not only academically oriented but also shape the Islamic personality of students (Juliani & Aslan, 2024).

In the context of educational leadership, the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic institutions is greatly influenced by the role of the headmaster or institution leader. An Islamic leadership style based on servant leadership and exemplary behaviour is very important to implement. Leaders need to demonstrate integrity, honesty, and commitment to Islamic values so that all members of the organisation are motivated to implement curriculum changes with the intention of worship. The exemplary behaviour (uswah hasanah) of leaders is the key to the success of changing the work culture that supports Islamic value-based education management. In addition to internal aspects, external collaboration with the community and parents is also an important component in the management of the Islamic-based Merdeka Curriculum. The values of mutual cooperation and social responsibility in Islam emphasise the importance of synergy between schools, families, and communities. Through strong partnerships, educational institutions can create a learning ecosystem that supports character education, spiritual discipline, and social awareness for students. This concept is in line with the mission of the Prophet Muhammad SAW in building a civil society based on knowledge, charity, and morals (R. Fitriani, 2022).

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic institutions also faces several challenges. One of them is the limited understanding of teachers regarding the flexibility of the curriculum, which is often misinterpreted as unlimited freedom. In addition, administrative pressure and academic demands still dominate, so that spiritual aspects are often marginalised. Therefore, change management rooted in the principles of patience, steadfastness, and trust in God is needed to foster awareness that every change is part of the process of scientific jihad and righteous deeds in the world of education (I. N. Fachry, 2021). The successful transformation of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation from an Islamic education management perspective will have a positive impact on strengthening the character of students. The integration of Islamic values in every dimension of management—planning, implementation, and evaluation—will produce perfect human beings, who are intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and socially whole. This is in line with the objectives of national education and maqasid al-syariah, which emphasise the importance of balance between knowledge, faith, and action. With this approach, education is not only a means of improving competence but also a process of shaping the identity of civilised human beings (Mariska & Aslan, 2024).

Overall, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum from an Islamic education management perspective is not merely an effort to adapt the national curriculum to a religious context, but a movement to transform values that unites the spirit of intellectual freedom with spiritual responsibility. When the principle of freedom is balanced with devotion to God, education will become a path to physical and spiritual well-being. Therefore, Islamic educational institutions must continue to strengthen their role as guides, guardians, and servants of change, so that the Merdeka Curriculum truly produces a generation of independent, characterful, and virtuous learners.

The Paradigm of Islamic Leadership in the Transformation of Education Management

Leadership is a key factor in determining the direction, success, and quality of educational management. In the context of Islamic educational institutions, leadership is not only understood as the ability to manage an organisation, but also as a form of moral and spiritual responsibility to uphold the values of truth and justice. The Islamic leadership paradigm is based on the principles of devotion to Allah SWT and responsibility towards humanity (amanah) (I. N. Fachry, 2021) . Therefore, the transformation of educational management must be based on leadership values oriented towards exemplary behaviour (uswah hasanah), wisdom (hikmah), and devotion (khidmah) to the educational community.

The concept of leadership in Islam is rooted in the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, which places leaders as caliphs on earth. A leader not only holds administrative power but also acts as a regulator, guide, and protector for all the elements under his leadership. In the context of education, the principal or head of an institution is likened to a shepherd (ra'in) who is responsible for the spiritual, intellectual, and moral welfare of students and teachers. This type of leadership requires a balance between authority and noble character, between professionalism and submission to divine law (Hifza, Juliana, et al., 2020) .

The Islamic leadership paradigm views that the main value of a leader lies not only in their ability to manage, but also in their ability to exemplify integrity, honesty, and sincerity. The Prophet Muhammad SAW is an ideal example of transformational leadership that inspires social change through compassion, effective communication, and steadfast principles. His leadership principles are known by four main characteristics: shiddiq (honesty), amanah (trustworthiness), tabligh (transparency in conveying the truth), and fathanah (intelligence and wisdom). These four characteristics form the main foundation for building humanistic, ethical, and visionary educational leadership (T. Z. Hanafi, 2021) .

In educational management practice, Islamic leadership cannot be separated from moral responsibility towards the vision of Islamic education itself, which is to develop well-rounded individuals (insan kamil). Leaders of educational institutions play a role not only in administrative aspects, but also in shaping a school organisational culture based on religious values (F. R. Alwi, 2020) . They must be able to motivate others to strive, inspire teachers to innovate, and create a learning environment with spiritual character. This type

of leadership encourages the creation of educational institutions that are not only academically excellent but also function as centres for moral and cultural development (A. H. Musa, 2021).

In the context of educational management transformation, Islamic transformative leadership style becomes an ideal model because it emphasises individual and organisational change towards a better direction based on the values of tauhid. Transformative leaders do not only focus on structural efficiency, but also play a role in raising the spiritual awareness and commitment of their members to a shared vision (F. M. Abdullah, 2020). In educational institutions, this is reflected in leadership that is able to motivate teachers, students, and the entire school community to actively participate in building a collaborative and worshipful learning environment.

One of the important characteristics of Islamic leadership is the nature of consultation (shura), where every important decision is made through a process of dialogue and joint participation. This principle directly contributes to the creation of democratic, transparent, and accountable educational management. In the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, for example, school principals and teachers can apply the principle of shura to design implementation strategies that are appropriate to the context of their respective schools. This process also prevents educational institutions from practising authoritarianism and opens up space for creative collaboration in the spirit of ukhuwah Islamiyah (Islamic brotherhood). In addition to the principle of deliberation, Islamic leadership also emphasises the importance of justice ('adl) in every policy and decision (S. R. Lestari, 2023). In educational institutions, justice is not only a matter of equitable distribution of tasks or resources, but also includes fairness in providing opportunities, rewards, and guidance to each individual. A fair leader will ensure that every member of the school community feels valued and has the opportunity to develop according to their potential. This has implications for increased performance, loyalty, and harmony in the educational environment (S. Wibowo, 2023).

The transformation of educational management based on Islamic leadership must also foster the value of responsibility (amanah) in every element of the organisation. The positions of headmaster, teacher, and staff are amanah that demand integrity in carrying out duties. When the principle of amanah is embedded in the culture of educational organisations, each individual will work not merely for the sake of bureaucracy, but as a form of devotion to Allah. In a managerial context, the value of amanah encourages the creation of a monitoring system based on moral awareness, not merely formal rules (Hayani et al., 2024).

Islamic leadership also places the value of compassion (rahmah) at the centre of interpersonal ethics in educational organisations. A compassionate leader will treat their subordinates with respect, understand differences in abilities, and provide guidance with patience. In educational management, this means building empathetic communication between leaders, teachers, students, and parents. By creating a harmonious and inclusive

work atmosphere, educational institutions can grow into communities that support each other and exemplify the values of brotherhood (Hutagaluh et al., 2020).

In the modern context, Islamic educational leadership needs to adapt to the challenges of globalisation, digitalisation, and rapid social change. Educational leaders are required to have high managerial and digital literacy, while still adhering to the principles of Sharia and Islamic ethics. Adaptive Islamic leadership does not reject modernity but integrates it within the framework of faith and morals. With this approach, leaders are able to utilise technology and innovation productively without sacrificing spiritual and humanitarian values (S. Wibowo, 2023).

Islamic leadership in education also functions as a means of organisational character building. Leaders with integrity will create a school culture based on akhlakul karimah, such as discipline, responsibility, honesty, and mutual assistance. This culture creates a work environment that supports the achievement of sustainable education quality. Through habit and example, Islamic values become not only rules, but are institutionalised into a collective character that lives in every activity of Education (H. R. Ismail, 2018).

However, the implementation of Islamic leadership in educational management transformation often faces structural and cultural obstacles. Some leaders are still trapped in bureaucratic leadership patterns that emphasise power over service. In addition, a lack of understanding of spiritual principles in management causes educational policies to be more oriented towards administrative targets than character building. Therefore, leadership transformation needs to be carried out through training, mentoring, and capacity building that combines modern management science with Islamic values (D. Sari, 2022). The success of the Islamic leadership paradigm in educational management will have broad implications for improving the quality of institutions, teacher morale, and student spirituality. Leadership that exemplifies the values of honesty, justice, and exemplary behaviour can create a conducive, meaningful, and transformative learning environment. Educational institutions managed according to Islamic principles not only produce knowledgeable graduates but also shape a generation with ethical awareness, social responsibility, and a spirit of contributing to civilisation (M. T. Zain, 2024).

Thus, the paradigm of Islamic leadership becomes central to the process of educational management transformation in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum. Such leadership demands not only efficiency but also a strong spiritual and moral orientation. Educational leaders based on Islamic values will view schools as fields of charity and arenas of da'wah that shape people of noble character. The integration of modern management and Islamic values will give rise to educational governance that is fair, competitive, and oriented towards a balance between knowledge, faith, and righteous deeds.

Conclusion

The transformation of Islamic value-based educational management is a strategic effort to respond to the increasingly complex challenges of modernising the national

education system. In the context of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, the Islamic approach provides moral and spiritual direction that balances freedom of thought with ethical responsibility. The Merdeka Curriculum is essentially in line with Islamic educational principles that emphasise the holistic development of human potential—spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social. Through education management based on the values of tauhid, amanah, adil, and ihsan, educational institutions can integrate national policy requirements and Islamic educational goals, namely to shape perfect individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, and have noble character.

The Islamic leadership paradigm is the main foundation for realising character-based and sustainable educational management transformation. Leadership in the Islamic perspective positions leaders as moral role models, drivers of change, and servants of the educational community. The principles of shiddiq, amanah, fathanah, and tabligh are the reference points for every managerial policy and strategic decision. Through leadership based on spiritual values, educational institutions function not only as knowledge management institutions but also as forums for character and civilisation building. Leaders who apply the values of justice, deliberation, and compassion will be able to create a harmonious, adaptive, and worshipful school culture.

Thus, the transformation of Islamic value-based education management through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Islamic leadership paradigm is an integral step in building a competitive education system rooted in spirituality. This education model is not only oriented towards academic results but also towards character building () and humanity. The synergy between an adaptive curriculum and faith-based management will produce progressive, equitable educational institutions that play an active role in shaping a knowledgeable and moral generation. Education based on Islamic values will ultimately become an important axis in creating a civilised, knowledgeable, and dignified civilisation amid global change.

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