

## **NEEDS ANALYSIS OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND CHARACTER EDUCATION TEACHERS IN IMPLEMENTING MERDEKA CURRICULUM**

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### **Abstract**

*The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia's Sekolah Penggerak (Driving Schools) necessitates a significant paradigm shift, demanding dynamic professional competence from Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers. This study aims to critically analyze the curriculum implementation process and explicitly identify the specific professional competence gaps PAI teachers face in realizing the Pancasila Student Profile. Employing a qualitative case study approach at SDN 02 and SDN 17 Rejang Lebong, comprehensive data were collected through classroom observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with school principals and PAI teachers. The results highlight three pivotal findings. First, while the schools successfully completed the mandatory five-stage intervention, the density and rapid delivery of online instructional materials resulted in a fragmented understanding of the curriculum's philosophical core among teachers. Second, although teachers have initiated diagnostic assessments and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), they encounter significant technical challenges in designing differentiated instruction and independently creating adaptive teaching modules that suit diverse student needs. Third, the study identifies a crucial, often overlooked need for specific professional development focused not only on digital literacy but also on psychological competence for character building and student-centered pedagogical strategies. The study concludes that standard, one-size-fits-all training is insufficient. Instead, sustainable, mentor-based coaching that integrates technological proficiency with psychological insights is essential to effectively bridge the gap between national policy expectations and the practical reality of classroom instruction.*

**Keywords:** *Merdeka Curriculum; PAI Teacher Competence; Sekolah Penggerak; Pancasila Student Profile; Professional Development.*

### **Abstrak**

*Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di Sekolah Penggerak di Indonesia menuntut adanya pergeseran paradigma yang signifikan, serta memerlukan kompetensi*



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*profesional yang dinamis dari guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara kritis proses implementasi kurikulum dan secara eksplisit mengidentifikasi kesenjangan kompetensi profesional yang dihadapi guru PAI dalam mewujudkan Profil Pelajar Pancasila. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif di SDN 02 dan SDN 17 Rejang Lebong, data komprehensif dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, analisis dokumen, dan wawancara mendalam dengan kepala sekolah serta guru PAI. Hasil penelitian menyoroti tiga temuan utama. Pertama, meskipun sekolah berhasil menyelesaikan intervensi wajib lima tahap, kepadatan dan kecepatan penyampaian materi pembelajaran daring menyebabkan pemahaman yang terfragmentasi terhadap inti filosofis kurikulum di kalangan guru. Kedua, meskipun guru telah memulai asesmen diagnostik dan Proyek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5), mereka menghadapi tantangan teknis yang signifikan dalam merancang pembelajaran berdiferensiasi dan secara mandiri membuat modul ajar adaptif yang sesuai dengan kebutuhan beragam siswa. Ketiga, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi kebutuhan penting yang sering terabaikan, yaitu pengembangan profesional yang berfokus tidak hanya pada literasi digital tetapi juga pada kompetensi psikologis untuk pembentukan karakter dan strategi pedagogis yang berpusat pada siswa. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pelatihan standar dengan pendekatan seragam tidaklah memadai. Sebaliknya, diperlukan pembinaan berkelanjutan berbasis mentor yang mengintegrasikan kecakapan teknologi dengan wawasan psikologis agar dapat menjembatani kesenjangan antara ekspektasi kebijakan nasional dan realitas praktis di kelas.*

**Keywords:** Kurikulum Merdeka; Kompetensi Guru PAI; Sekolah Penggerak; Profil Pelajar Pancasila; Pengembangan Profesional.

## **A. Introduction**

The curriculum is a collection of learning components that are very important in determining the foundation, principles, direction, and objectives of education in Indonesia. The curriculum is also a reference for teaching; without a curriculum, learning is automatically unfocused (Aransyah et al., 2023). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology has realized the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) since 2021 by launching the *Sekolah Penggerak* program. For the first batch, there were 2,492 schools involved, followed by subsequent batches totaling 26,747 schools included in the school mover program. Schools designated as *Sekolah Penggerak* are those that have met certain criteria to serve as pilot projects for the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Anggraini et al., 2022).

The *Sekolah Penggerak* program itself aims to improve the quality of student learning through five interventions. This initiative hopes to accelerate schools one to two stages forward within a period of three academic years. In order to support

success in the learning process, each teacher must always hone their competence through participation in various activities such as training, seminars, workshops, or conducting educational research studies like classroom action research (Haikal et al., 2025). With these various activities, teachers will develop expertise in teaching, which includes teaching strategies and techniques, classroom management, improving discipline, and implementing effective teaching and learning principles.

To support the student-centered approach required by the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers must master effective pedagogical strategies. Research by (Warsah et al., 2021) highlights the efficacy of collaborative learning in Islamic education settings, suggesting that when PAI teachers implement collaborative strategies, they not only engage students but also create a democratic learning atmosphere. Therefore, the professional competence of teachers in designing group-based learning activities is a fundamental requirement for current curriculum implementation. Furthermore, recent studies by (Badrin et al., 2024) reinforce that the dynamic of multicultural competence is critical in dealing with complex interactions in religious and cultural differences, which aligns with the curriculum's demand for inclusive education. Additionally, in the era of digital transformation, educators must adapt to new tools to maintain student engagement. (Al Yakin et al., 2025) suggest that AI-powered solutions can be leveraged to foster social relationships and support sustainable development in educational institutions. This implies that teachers' competence must evolve to include technological literacy that supports social connectivity.

The ultimate goal of modern education is to foster high-order thinking skills. In a related analysis, it was found that the consistent application of collaborative learning significantly impacts learners' critical thinking skills (Warsah et al., 2021). For PAI teachers in *Sekolah Penggerak*, understanding how to stimulate critical thinking is crucial for realizing the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly the dimension of critical reasoning (*bernalar kritis*).

Beyond pedagogy, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes character strengthening (*Budi Pekerti*), which requires teachers to possess psychological insights. Literature by (Warsah, 2020a) explores the concept of forgiveness from the perspective of positive psychology and Islam, arguing that this trait is essential for mental well-being and social harmony. PAI teachers must effectively internalize and teach such psychological virtues. Consequently, a teacher's professional competence must include the ability to integrate positive psychology indicators into moral education. According to (Carles et al., 2025), counseling services and the role of educators are pivotal in transformative education, helping students build emotional resilience and adaptability in the modern era.

In the context of global challenges and Indonesia's diverse society, PAI teachers also face the specific task of guiding students' ideological understanding toward religious moderation. (Daheri et al., 2023) emphasize the importance of strengthening religious moderation by understanding factors such as togetherness and socio-religious traditions in multi-religious communities. Teachers must possess deep theological competence to explain religious terms moderately (*wasathiyah*) and prevent radicalism. This ensures that the implementation of the curriculum not only focuses on academic scores but also safeguards students from extremist narratives by promoting inclusive and moderate Islamic values through a proper understanding of concepts like *jihad*, as highlighted by (Warsah, 2021).

Implementation of a new curriculum also demands administrative agility and innovation. Studies by (Warsah & Nuzuar, 2018) on PAI teacher innovation indicate that administrative orderliness and strategic planning are vital for educational success. Teachers in *Sekolah Penggerak* are expected to be innovative not just in teaching, but in managing learning evidence and assessment data. Thus, administrative competence is identified as a necessary support system for the successful delivery of the Merdeka Curriculum. Finally, the core of Islamic education lies in the educator's personality. Research by (Warsah & Nuzuar, 2018) discusses the psychological profile of religious educators, emphasizing traits such as compassion (*Al-Rahmah*) and sincerity. The success of transferring values in the Merdeka Curriculum depends heavily on the teacher's ability to be a role model (*uswah hasanah*). Therefore, the needs analysis must also consider the "personality competence" of teachers as a foundation for their professional performance.

Despite these theoretical requirements, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers face practical challenges in implementing the curriculum. They begin by following the five interventions of the program. However, a separate challenge exists for PAI teachers in *Sekolah Penggerak*, particularly regarding the implementation of the "dual-curriculum" in the teaching and learning process. The operational curriculum in educational units takes into account the diverse characteristics of students and prioritizes a dynamic, reflective process so that the final goal of the Pancasila Student Profile can be achieved as expected. It is important for teachers to have adequate basic competencies to navigate these demands (Ismaniati et al., 2025). The implementation of the Independent Curriculum implies and requires teachers to develop an operational curriculum by referring to content standards, process standards, and education assessment standards, in accordance with the vision and mission of their respective schools and regions.

Given these complexities, a needs analysis is required. Needs analysis is a process to identify professional competency needs that must be met for Islamic

Religious Education and Character teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum to realize the Pancasila Student Profile. Therefore, researchers are interested in analyzing the needs of PAI and *Budi Pekerti* teachers, specifically focusing on the gap between current capabilities and the required professional competence in implementing the Independent Curriculum (Cholilah et al., 2023).

Based on the background and the identified gaps in previous studies, the primary objective of this research is to explicitly analyze the professional competence needs of Islamic Religious Education and Character (*PAI dan Budi Pekerti*) teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) examine how the Merdeka Curriculum is currently being implemented in Phase 1 *Sekolah Penggerak* (SDN 02 and SDN 17 Rejang Lebong); and (2) identify the specific training and competency improvements required by PAI teachers to effectively realize the Pancasila Student Profile. By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to provide a clear recommendation for designing targeted professional development programs for religious educators in the context of national curriculum reform.

## **B. Research Methods**

This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the professional competency needs of Islamic Religious Education and Character (*PAI dan Budi Pekerti*) teachers in two Phase 1 *Sekolah Penggerak* in Rejang Lebong Regency, namely SDN 02 and SDN 17 (Auliya et al., 2020). These schools were selected purposively as they represent early adopters of the national curriculum reform (Murdiyanto, 2020).

The participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure the data's relevance and depth. The total number of key informants was six, consisting of two school principals and four Islamic Religious Education and Character teachers (two from each school). The selection of these participants was based on specific inclusion criteria: (1) active teaching status at Phase 1 *Sekolah Penggerak*; (2) minimum teaching experience of two years to ensure familiarity with school culture; and (3) direct involvement in the planning and implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). The rationale for selecting these individuals is that they serve as the primary actors in the curriculum reform process, possessing first-hand experience regarding the competency gaps and challenges faced during the transition to the Merdeka Curriculum.

The selection of topic and case was grounded in the field of educational management, aligning with the researcher's academic background. The study began with an extensive literature review, including scholarly journals, previous studies, official documents, and policy guidelines to support conceptual grounding. The research focus and questions were then refined to guide data collection and analysis. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews with school principals and PAI teachers, participatory observations, and documentation of school activities and official reports related to the curriculum implementation.

To ensure data completeness and relevance, iterative readings and cross-referencing with research questions were conducted. The collected data were then processed through validation, organization, coding, classification, and clarification of interview responses. Data analysis involved thematic interpretation aimed at constructing meaning, patterns, and categories that addressed the research focus. The findings were further interpreted through theoretical dialogue with relevant literature to generate a conceptual synthesis. Triangulation was applied by presenting the findings to the original informants for confirmation and validation (confirmability), reducing the risk of researcher bias.

The study was conducted over a period of three months, specifically from July to September 2025, during the odd semester of the academic year 2025/2026. This timeframe was chosen to observe the active implementation of the curriculum projects at the beginning of the school year. Although no statistical analysis was used due to the qualitative nature of the study, efforts were made to maintain methodological rigor and transparency to allow replication. The main limitations included the scope being confined to two schools and the challenges of data collection in an educational reform context still undergoing active implementation.

## **C. Results and Discussion**

### **Research Findings**

#### **1. *The Intervention Process in the Sekolah Penggerak Program***

The transformation into a *Sekolah Penggerak* began with a selection process that was initially unfamiliar to the school community. Based on the interview, the principal revealed that the initial registration was driven by instructions from the education office rather than full awareness. As stated by the informant:

*"Initially in 2021, we from the office were told to register for a school for movers... I discussed it with my fellow teachers, they all supported registering... even though we didn't know what a school for movers was. Because not many people knew, only a few registered... finally there was an*



*instruction for all schools to register."* (Informant UM, Principal of SDN 02, Interview, August 12, 2025).

After the administrative process, the principals underwent a rigorous selection test comprising written exams, interviews, and teaching simulations.

*"After registering, we took an online test... there were several stages of the test: written test, interview, scholastic, and teaching practice. Thank God our school passed, in Rejang Lebong there are about 7 elementary schools that passed the School Mover."* (Informant UM, Principal of SDN 02, Interview, August 12, 2025).

Once selected, the program implementation began with the formation of a 'Learning Committee' (*Komite Pembelajaran*) consisting of the Principal, School Supervisor, and selected teachers (Grades 1, 4, PAI, and PJOK). The intervention involved intensive training facilitated by the Ministry.

*"Starting with the formation of a Learning Committee... then the first activity is training guided directly by the Ministry of Education and Culture for 10 days for the Learning Committee, continued with in-house training for 8 days for the first year..."* (Informant UM, Principal of SDN 02, Interview, August 12, 2025).

## **2. Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by PAI Teachers**

The findings show that PAI and Character Education teachers have implemented several key stages of the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*):

- a. Diagnostic Assessment: Teachers conduct assessments at the beginning of learning to identify student needs.
- b. Planning Learning Outcomes (CP) and Objectives (TP): Teachers use the government-set Learning Outcomes (CP) to formulate operational Learning Objectives (TP).
- c. Designing Teaching Modules: Teachers have moved from traditional lesson plans to Teaching Modules (*Modul Ajar*).
- d. Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5): PAI teachers are actively involved in P5. However, challenges remain regarding the technical implementation. As explained by a PAI teacher:

*"The challenges that arise in the implementation of P5 in the school environment include several things, namely some teachers have difficulty understanding the steps for implementing P5. One solution is to refer to the existing P5 guide... In addition, teachers may need help in creating project modules..."* (Informant AN, PAI Teacher at SDN 17, Interview, August 14, 2025).

### **3. Professional Competence Needs**

Despite the training provided, teachers expressed a need for further professional development to fully adapt to the curriculum. The specific needs identified include:

- a. Training on Differentiated Learning: Teachers need more practical guidance on how to cater to diverse student needs.
- b. Mentoring and Coaching: There is a demand for continuous mentoring, not just one-off training.

*"We need training, mentoring, both directly with fellow teachers and via webinars... specifically on the characteristics and learning methods of students or learning with a differentiation approach."*  
(Informant AN, PAI Teacher at SDN 17, Interview, August 14, 2025).

## **Discussion**

### **1. Intervention in the Elementary School Mover Program in Rejang Lebong Regency**

The first stage of the *Sekolah Penggerak* (Driving School) program at SDN 02 and SDN 17 Rejang Lebong involved active participation in five scheduled interventions facilitated by resource persons and materials from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. These interventions were attended by key educational actors, including School Principals, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Character Education teachers, Physical Education teachers, and class teachers.

The *Sekolah Penggerak* program aims to improve the quality of student learning through these five interventions, with the hope of accelerating schools one to two stages forward within three academic years (Laia et al., 2025). The five interventions are interrelated and inseparable: (1) consultative and asymmetric assistance, (2) strengthening school human resources, (3) learning with a new paradigm, (4) data-based planning, and (5) school digitalization. Regarding the digitalization aspect, (Al Yakin et al., 2025) suggest that utilizing technology and AI-powered solutions in educational institutions is increasingly vital for fostering social relationships and supporting sustainable development. This implies that the fifth intervention is not just about hardware, but about creating a sustainable, technology-integrated learning ecosystem.

Furthermore, according to Zamjani, the program is implemented by strengthening the capacity of school principals and teachers who are the keys to educational restructuring (Rahayu et al., 2022). This finding aligns with the view



that teacher competence must be dynamic rather than static. (Badrin et al., 2024) emphasizes that the dynamics of teacher competence are critical in adapting to new curriculum demands, where teachers are expected to continuously update their instructional strategies to meet evolving educational standards. Therefore, the interventions carried out in Rejang Lebong serve as the necessary foundation to facilitate this dynamic adaptation and accelerate the school's progress.

## ***2. Implementation of the Independent Curriculum by Islamic Religious Education and Character Education Teachers towards the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project at the Rejang Lebong Regency Mover School***

First, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Character Education teachers at SDN 02 and SDN 17 Rejang Lebong have begun to understand the outline of the independent curriculum through policies issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The first step in implementing the independent curriculum is indeed to understand the applicable regulations and academic studies for learning recovery (Suryani et al., 2023). This necessity to grasp new policies highlights the dynamic nature of the profession. As noted by (Badrin et al., 2024), the dynamics of PAI teacher competence are critical in the era of the Independent Curriculum; teachers are required to continuously adapt their cognitive understanding of regulations to meet evolving educational standards.

Second, based on the results of interviews and observations, it was found that PAI teachers have understood the concepts of learning design and assessment. Although they admit the need for continued learning and practice, the implementation is realized thanks to the guidance of the principal and collaboration with other educators. This collaborative spirit is essential. (Badrin et al., 2024) argue that in diverse educational communities, maintaining such competence which includes the ability to collaborate and interact effectively is a contributing factor to successful community building. By collaborating, PAI teachers in Rejang Lebong are essentially modeling the inclusive and cooperative values required by the curriculum.

There are several stages in this implementation, starting with the Diagnostic Assessment. PAI teachers at SDN 02 and SDN 17 perform diagnostic assessments as a basis for designing learning plans, ensuring that learning aligns with student needs. However, findings indicate they still require training and mentoring to perfect this process (Nurhantara & Utami, 2023). Diagnostic assessment is crucial not only for academic placement but for understanding the student as a whole. (Carles et al., 2025) emphasize that the role of educators in *transformative education*

involves understanding the students' condition to build emotional resilience. Therefore, assessment planning, especially in the initial stages, is necessary to identify students' learning needs and design learning that corresponds to their achievement stage.

### **3. Understanding Learning Outcomes**

In determining the learning outcomes (*Capaian Pembelajaran* or CP), PAI and Character Education Teachers at SDN 02 and SDN 17 Rejang Lebong utilize the standards set by the government as their primary guide. Understanding CP is a crucial first step; every educator must be familiar with what they need to teach. However, because the government-set CP is often abstract, it must be broken down into more operational objectives. (Putri, 2024) state that Learning Outcomes aim to improve the quality of learning and foster independent character. This aligns with the broader goal of Islamic education today, which is not merely about knowledge transfer but about developing cognitive skills. (Warsah et al., 2021) highlight that effective instruction in PAI should stimulate critical thinking skills, ensuring that students reach the end of the phase with deep analytical abilities.

The next step is Formulating Learning Objectives (TP). Teachers in Rejang Lebong formulate these based on the CP to make them operational and concrete. According to Suwono in (Muzakki et al., 2023), learning objectives can be formulated in two forms: what the teacher will do and what the students will master. In the context of PAI, these objectives must also be transformative. (Carles et al., 2025) argue that education, supported by proper guidance, should function as a transformative process, helping students build resilience and adaptability. Thus, the formulation of TP is not just administrative but a strategic step in character building.

After formulating objectives, teachers proceed to Preparing the Flow of Learning Objectives (ATP). In this stage, teachers at SDN 02 and SDN 17 often modify the ATP examples provided by the government. (Rahman et al., 2024) explain that this step is vital for learning planning. According to Agus Prasetyo Utoma et al., the ATP functions to direct teachers in planning and evaluating learning systematically, consistently, and measurably (Sa'i & Jinan, 2022). The method of compiling the ATP must be logical, moving from simple to complex abilities. The ability to arrange this flow logically reflects the teacher's pedagogical depth. As (Badrin et al., 2024) notes, teacher competence must remain dynamic to effectively structure learning in a changing educational landscape.

The final stage in this planning process is Designing Teaching Modules. Findings show that teachers have designed modules to serve as the basis for learning and assessment, effectively replacing the traditional lesson plans (*RPP*). As

explained by Irmaliya et al., a module is a complete, stand-alone unit (Novita et al., 2022). Furthermore, Fathan explains that without a well-planned module, the delivery of content will not be systematic and may seem uninteresting. To ensure the modules remain relevant and engaging, teachers are encouraged to incorporate modern tools. (Al Yakin et al., 2025) suggest that leveraging technology and AI-powered solutions can enhance the learning environment. While teachers currently adapt modules from the government to suit the school context (Rahayu et al., 2022), the future direction points towards integrating more digital solutions into these modules.

#### **4. Implementation of Learning, Assessment, and the P5 Project**

The implementation of learning at SDN 02 and SDN 17 begins with a diagnostic assessment to develop strategies tailored to student needs. Educators then execute a cycle of planning, differentiated learning, and periodic formative/summative assessments (Asiati & Hasanah, 2022). Furthermore, teachers are involved in drafting the Operational Curriculum of Educational Units (KOSP), ensuring that the learning process aligns with the specific context of the school.

A crucial component of this curriculum is the *Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project* (P5). Findings reveal that while teachers contribute to P5, many still struggle with the technical steps and module creation (Zakso, 2023). However, the challenge of P5 is not merely technical; it is deeply rooted in psychological and multicultural competencies. (Carles et al., 2025) argue that the role of educators in transformative education includes providing counseling services to build students' emotional resilience. Teachers must act as role models (*uswah hasanah*). Moreover, (Warsah, 2020b) adds that integrating positive psychology concepts, such as forgiveness, is essential for mental well-being in character education. Additionally, given the diverse nature of Indonesian society, PAI teachers need multicultural competence to manage the complex interactions inherent in P5 group projects, as emphasized by (Badrin et al., 2024).

#### **5. Professional Competence Needs: Towards Digital and Moderate Educators**

The needs analysis confirms that PAI teachers in Rejang Lebong urgently require training and mentoring, particularly in differentiation strategies and student-centered learning. As noted by Zaharah binti Hussin, professional development must include training on effective digital tools while maintaining Islamic values. This highlights the intersection of pedagogy and technology. (Al Yakin et al., 2025) suggest that in the modern era, AI-powered solutions and digital tools should be leveraged to foster social relationships and support sustainable

development in education. Therefore, the "mentoring" needed by these teachers should extend beyond traditional workshops to include digital platforms that bridge the competency gap.

Finally, beyond technical and digital skills, the core duty of PAI teachers involves ideological guidance. The *Sekolah Penggerak* curriculum promotes diversity and tolerance. (Daheri et al., 2023) emphasize the importance of strengthening religious moderation by learning from the harmony of multi-religious communities. PAI teachers must possess the theological competence to explain religious terms moderately (*wasathiyah*) to prevent radicalism. This ensures that the technical implementation of the Independent Curriculum remains aligned with the ultimate goal of creating moderate, tolerant, and noble-character students.

#### **D. Conclusion**

This study concludes that the implementation of the Phase 1 Sekolah Penggerak Program at SDN 02 and SDN 17 Rejang Lebong has been conducted in accordance with the scheduled interventions set by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. However, the effectiveness of these interventions, particularly those delivered through online platforms, remains limited due to the condensed materials, time constraints, and lack of hands-on support. As a result, school principals and teachers, including those teaching Islamic Religious Education and Character (PAI and Budi Pekerti), still face challenges in fully understanding and applying the Merdeka Curriculum.

Despite these limitations, PAI and Budi Pekerti teachers have made efforts to implement the curriculum, especially in the context of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project. They have participated in curriculum development, designed and managed learning and assessment activities based on student development stages, and collaborated on project planning and evaluation. Nevertheless, the study identified gaps in pedagogical understanding and professional competence, which indicate the need for ongoing and structured capacity building.

Based on these findings, several suggestions are proposed. First, school principals should continuously provide mentoring and facilitate ongoing training for PAI and Budi Pekerti teachers to enhance their professional competencies. Second, PAI and Budi Pekerti teachers are encouraged to actively participate in both in-house and external training programs, including teacher learning communities, to avoid falling behind other subject teachers and to better implement the Merdeka Curriculum. Third, future researchers are encouraged to use this study as a reference for further research on the professional competencies of PAI and Budi Pekerti teachers in the context of curriculum reform.

Although this study provides a fairly comprehensive overview of the professional competence needs of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Character Education teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the scope of the research was confined to two elementary schools (SDN 02 and SDN 17 Rejang Lebong) as early-stage Sekolah Penggerak, thus the findings cannot be broadly generalized to other schools with different characteristics. Second, the limited number of informants (six individuals) renders the results more exploratory than representative. Third, the qualitative approach employed—through observation, interviews, and document analysis—may be influenced by the subjectivity of both researchers and informants, despite triangulation efforts undertaken to minimize bias. Fourth, the relatively short duration of the study (three months) restricted its ability to capture the long-term dynamics of Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Therefore, further research with a wider scope, a larger number of informants, and a longer observation period is necessary to strengthen and deepen the findings.

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