Optimizing Religious Learning in Public Schools: Challenges and Solutions to Time Limitations

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Abstract: *Religious education in public schools plays an important role in shaping the spiritual, ethical, and moral character of students, but its implementation faces a number of complex obstacles. This study aims to identify various challenges in religious education in public schools, particularly time constraints, and to offer relevant solutions to optimize its implementation. The research method used is a literature study by reviewing literature from national journals, proceedings, and scientific books over the last ten years to obtain a comprehensive picture of this issue. The results of the analysis show that time constraints are a major factor affecting the depth of students' understanding of religious values, as limited class hours often make the learning process formal and fail to touch on affective and applicative aspects. Other significant challenges include low student interest and motivation to learn, limited digital learning facilities that can support creativity, and limited teacher competence in developing innovative contextual methods. In addition, the multicultural factor in the form of diversity in students' cultural and religious backgrounds requires a high level of sensitivity so that religious education remains inclusive and harmonious. The conclusion findings of this study demonstrate that enhancing the quality of religious education necessitates a multifaceted approach that extends beyond mere augmentation of instructional hours. Achieving this objective necessitates a multifaceted approach, encompassing comprehensive support from various stakeholders, including teachers, schools, families, and policymakers.*

Keywords: *Islamic Religious Education; Learning Challenges; Learning Strategies; Multiculturalism; Optimization.*

Abstrak: *Pembelajaran agama di sekolah umum memiliki peran penting dalam membentuk karakter spiritual, etika, dan moral peserta didik. Namun, praktik pembelajaran masih menghadapi berbagai kendala yang kompleks. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi tantangan pembelajaran agama di sekolah umum, terutama keterbatasan alokasi waktu, serta menawarkan solusi yang relevan untuk mengoptimalkan pelaksanaannya. Metode penelitian menggunakan studi kepustakaan dengan menelaah literatur dari jurnal nasional, prosiding, dan buku ilmiah yang terbit dalam sepuluh tahun terakhir. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa keterbatasan waktu menjadi faktor utama yang memengaruhi kedalaman pemahaman siswa terhadap nilai-nilai agama. Rendahnya minat belajar,*

keterbatasan fasilitas pembelajaran digital, dan kompetensi guru yang belum merata juga memperkuat hambatan tersebut. Faktor multikultural berupa keberagaman latar belakang budaya dan agama siswa menambah tantangan karena menuntut pendekatan yang inklusif. Simpulan penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa optimalisasi pembelajaran agama tidak cukup hanya dengan menambah jam pelajaran, melainkan membutuhkan dukungan menyeluruh dari guru, sekolah, keluarga, dan pemangku kebijakan untuk menjawab tantangan yang beragam.

Kata kunci: *Pendidikan Agama Islam; Tantangan Pembelajaran; Sreategi Pembelajaran; Multikultural; Optimalisasi.*

Introduction

The role of religious education in public schools is of paramount importance in shaping students' character, particularly in instilling spiritual, ethical, and moral values. Within Indonesia's national education system, religious education is a compulsory component of the curriculum. However, the implementation of these programmes faces various challenges, particularly the limited time allocated for learning. The restriction of instructional time frequently results in religious education being merely formal and superficial, thereby impeding the optimal achievement of its ideal goals (Puti Anisa, Sefti Angraini, 2025).

It has been demonstrated by preceding studies that the time allocated for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in state schools is constrained by the national curriculum structure, which allocates greater emphasis to subjects believed to have a significant impact on academic achievement, such as mathematics, language, and science. This has resulted in the marginalisation of religious education, both in terms of policy and practical implementation in schools (Humaedi & Hartono, 2021). This situation is further compounded by the perspective of a group of people who consider religious education to be an elective subject, rather than a fundamental component in shaping students' character.

In addition to the issue of time allocation, a number of studies demonstrate that the teaching techniques applied by teachers are still dominated by conventional methods, such as one-way lectures and memorization. This model is regarded as uninteresting and lacking a strong connection to the reality of students' daily lives. Consequently, student participation in the learning process is minimal, resulting in suboptimal achievement of the primary objectives of PAI in fostering religious character and exemplary conduct (Soleha, 2024). The findings of research by (Suryaningtiyas Puspa Wardhani, Siti Nurjanah, Rahmad hidayat, Tri yuli lestari, Junnaidah, 2024) confirm that Islamic education needs to undergo curriculum adjustments, the adoption of technology-based methodological innovations, and an enhancement of teacher competencies if it is to remain both relevant and of high quality in the modern era.

Innovative efforts to address time constraints have been proposed, such as the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL), which has been proven to improve PAI understanding and make students more active and creative (Rachman & Nurhanifansyah, 2024). Furthermore, the thematic-integrative approach is regarded as an effective strategy for optimising religious education by incorporating religious values into other subjects. For example, (Ulfa & Ramadhansyah, 2023) developed a thematic-integrative model based on a "spider web" that integrates verses from the Qur'an into the fundamental competencies of various subjects within a single theme. This enables the systematic and relevant conveyance of religious values within the

framework of cross-disciplinary contextual learning. Recent studies demonstrate that the integration of local wisdom and multicultural education in PAI can enhance the relevance of the curriculum, promote tolerance, and foster social harmony in public schools with diverse student populations (Riyanti & Novitasari, 2021).

Consequently, a research gap has emerged, necessitating the development of a comprehensive conceptual framework that integrates these innovative strategies to enhance religious education in public schools, particularly within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. The present article aims to analyze the factors that cause limited duration of religious education, identify the challenges faced by teachers and students, and formulate optimization strategies that are not only effective but also relevant to real life, multicultural, and based on local wisdom. It is hypothesized that this approach will ensure the continued relevance of the religious education process and facilitate the development of students' religious character, despite the constrained time available.
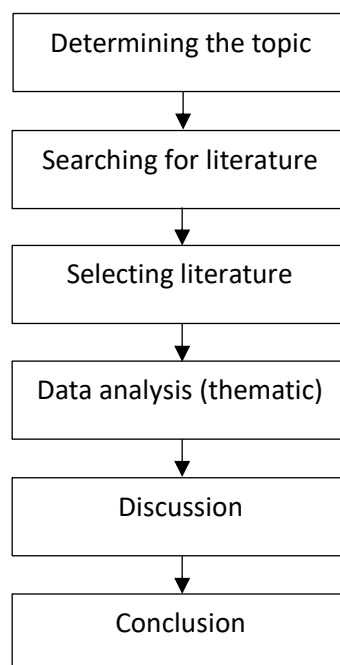
Method

The present study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a literature review method. This approach was selected because it aligns with the research objectives, which center on exploring, understanding, and critically analyzing theoretical thinking and previous research findings related to Islamic religious education in public schools. A literature review enables researchers to examine various academic sources without conducting field observations, thereby obtaining a comprehensive picture of the issues under study (Snyder, 2019).

The relevant literature was meticulously collected from a number of academic databases, including Google Scholar, DOAJ, Garuda, and ResearchGate, employing a set of keywords such as "Islamic religious education in public schools," "challenges in allocating time for PAI," "innovative religious learning strategies," "PAI independent curriculum," and "character-based religious education." The selected publications were limited to the last ten years (2015–2025) to ensure relevance, although some classic sources were still used as a conceptual foundation.

The selection of literature was conducted using inclusion criteria, namely articles published in peer-reviewed journals, proceedings, or scientific books that directly address the challenges and strategies for optimizing religious education in public schools, and are available in Indonesian or English with full access. The exclusion criteria encompass non-academic articles, publications that discuss the context of non-formal education, and works that do not provide empirical data or relevant theoretical frameworks (Nuruddin, 2022).

This study employs thematic analysis to explore the patterns and meanings that emerge from a range of previous studies. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the context and content of each article, all selected literature was meticulously reviewed on multiple occasions. A reading process was conducted, from which key ideas emerged. These ideas were subsequently coded, with a focus on the limitations of learning time, curriculum load, teacher competence, and policy support. The codes were then organized into sub-themes based on their semantic similarities. These sub-themes were subsequently reviewed to ensure consistency with the research focus and to avoid overlap. During this process, the researcher meticulously documented all decisions, including the rationale behind combining or separating codes. This approach ensured the steps were both transparent and systematic. The analysis yielded three overarching themes that emerged as the common thread in the extant

literature: the causes of limited time allocation for Islamic religious education, the challenges of implementing PAI in public schools, and the optimization strategies proposed by previous studies. This approach enables the synthesis to be structured, clear, and accountable, while also building a more integrative conceptual framework for future studies.

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Result

The findings of the study indicate that the scarcity of time allotted to PAI in public schools is attributable to a confluence of interrelated factors. These factors include national curriculum policies that prioritize cognitive domains, the perception that religious education is non-essential, the limited number of permanent PAI teachers, and the multicultural landscape within educational institutions. This state of affairs has led to the marginalization of PAI and the curtailment of opportunities for the cultivation of students' religious character. Moreover, time constraints have substantial ramifications for pedagogical practices, encompassing waning student interest, constrained digital resources, and the imperative to adapt instruction to the multicultural milieu. PAI teachers have demonstrated a tendency to rely on conventional pedagogical methods, such as textual instruction and lecture-based delivery, which hinders the effective internalization of religious values in a profound and pragmatic manner.

However, the discourse also revealed a number of strategies that could be optimized. The integration of digital technology has been demonstrated to facilitate enhanced access to educational resources. The incorporation of religious values into various academic disciplines enables the development of interdisciplinary internalization processes. Moreover, extracurricular religious activities contribute to the accumulation of practical experiences among students. In a multicultural context, a tolerance-based and inclusive approach must be emphasized, and the application of contextual and thematic learning has proven to be relevant in linking Islamic teachings to the realities of students' lives. The findings of this study demonstrate

that time constraints do not constitute a significant impediment to the efficacy of innovative, inclusive, and adaptive learning strategies. These strategies facilitate the ongoing function of PAI in shaping religious, tolerant, and noble character.

Discussion

1. The Factor of Limited Time Allocation

The limited duration of religious education, which is only two hours per week in public schools, is undoubtedly attributable to specific rationales. This phenomenon stems from various interrelated factors, which can be categorized into two aspects: national education policy and the internal situation of the school. In order to comprehend the limited allocation of time to religious education, a comprehensive analysis of the primary factors influencing this policy is imperative. These factors encompass curriculum policy, perspectives on the role of religious education, the availability of qualified teachers, and multicultural considerations. A review of the extant literature reveals four factors that contribute to the minimal allocation of time for religious education in public schools. These factors include national curriculum policy, the perception that religious education is non-essential, the limited number of permanent religious teachers, and multicultural factors.

The national curriculum policy in Indonesia has undergone numerous modifications to align with global developments and address local needs. One of the main curricula implemented is the 2013 Curriculum (K13), which emphasizes competency-based education that focuses more on assessing learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Consequently, religious education is frequently regarded as a mere adjunct or perfunctory administrative exercise, rather than a pivotal instrument for cultivating character that is devout, pious, and virtuous, as delineated in the National Education System Law. However, the implementation of K13 has been met with criticism, as it allocates a limited amount of time for PAI, specifically two hours per week. This situation is regarded as inadequate for fostering the comprehensive development of students' religious character (Nurhasanah, 2022)

Furthermore, the pressure to achieve high academic scores in subjects tested in national examinations or those that are important requirements for college admission also has an impact on the attention given by students, teachers, and schools to PAI. Consequently, religious education is frequently regarded as a mere adjunct or perfunctory administrative exercise, rather than a pivotal instrument for cultivating character that is devout, pious, and virtuous, as delineated in the National Education System Law. In response to the challenges posed by the implementation of K13 and the repercussions of the pandemic, the government devised the Merdeka Curriculum, which seeks to enhance the autonomy of educational institutions. The curriculum is designed to enhance the five fundamental principles of the Student Profile, foster character development, and integrate project-based learning. Furthermore, the Merdeka Curriculum aspires to motivate educators to adopt a more creative approach in the development of instructional materials that align with the diverse needs of students (Sutri Ramah & Miftahur Rohman, 2023)

Despite the Merdeka Curriculum's initial conception with a flexible approach, its implementation has encountered challenges. The implementation of this initiative in madrasahs and public schools has encountered various challenges. In the context of madrasahs and public schools, challenges such as limited resources, teachers' lack of understanding of the new curriculum, and inadequate infrastructure remain major

obstacles. In light of these findings, it is evident that a thorough evaluation of national curriculum policy is imperative to attain a harmonious balance between academic achievement and character development. In order to confront the challenges of the contemporary era and the demands of national education, it is imperative to implement a range of strategies, including the reinforcement of religious values in all academic disciplines, the extension of PAI learning time, and the incorporation of religious educators in the development of the curriculum (Hatta, 2023).

The fundamental problem in PAI in public schools is the assumption that religious education is not important in the national education system. This perspective is held by policymakers, the community, and educators themselves, leading to the perception that PAI is often regarded as a normative subject that does not contribute to the academic quality of students. In the context of global competition and the challenges posed by the 4.0 industrial revolution, the value of religious studies is often perceived as negligible. The prioritization of literacy and numeracy in national education policy serves to reinforce the prevailing assumption that religious education plays no significant role in the competencies required for success in the workplace or in higher education. This assumption often results in the neglect of religious studies in the development of learning plans, with respect to both the allocation of time and the allocation of teaching resources as well as evaluation methods (Adelia Putri et al., 2024).

his perspective is further bolstered by contemporary educational trends that prioritize quantitative assessments of educational success, such as academic grades, rankings, and cognitive achievements. This paradigm shift in educational priorities has resulted in a notable shift in the focus of education from character development to academic achievement. Religious education, with its emphasis on affective and spiritual dimensions, is not readily quantifiable using conventional evaluation instruments. Consequently, its contribution to "educational success" remains obscured in reports and assessments. Conversely, the assertion that religious education is of negligible importance is demonstrably fallacious, as it fails to acknowledge the comprehensive nature of national education objectives. The assertion that religious education is of negligible importance is fallacious, as it disregards the comprehensive objectives of national education. Law No. 20 of 2003 underscores the cultivation of students' potential to evolve into individuals who are devout, possess commendable character, and demonstrate responsibility. The role of religious education in the development of students' character and moral compass is a subject of significant interest. It has been observed that students who receive a religious education tend to exhibit positive social behaviour. While the impact of religious education on academic performance is not direct, its role in fostering social stability is of paramount importance. In the context of a diverse Indonesia, the role of religious education in shaping the ethical principles and behavioural norms of the younger generation is paramount, particularly in the face of moral challenges (Achadi, 2018).

This non-essential assumption also has a profound impact on the quality of PAI teachers and existing learning facilities. When religious education is regarded as being of lesser importance, the professional development of religious teachers is frequently not prioritized in training, and the provision of religious learning media is also neglected. This phenomenon has led to substandard PAI instruction in numerous public schools. Consequently, it is imperative to transition from an educational paradigm that prioritizes academic achievement to a more holistic educational approach that encompasses cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions. A series of strategic steps must be given priority if the objectives of the initiative are to be realized. These steps include the integration of religious values in

all subjects, the improvement of the quality of PAI teachers, and the strengthening of the position of PAI in school policy (Samrin, 2015).

The dearth of permanent religious teachers in public schools constitutes a salient structural factor that elucidates the suboptimal effectiveness PAI lessons in Indonesia. The presence of permanent teachers is an essential component in ensuring continuity, stability, and quality of learning, including the transmission of religious values to students. However, in reality, in various regions, especially in 3T (frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged) areas, the number of PAI teachers is still very minimal. According to data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, a significant number of elementary and secondary schools in Indonesia still lack PAI teachers who are on the civil servant (PNS) payroll. A considerable number of educational institutions are compelled to employ temporary teachers who, in some cases, lack the requisite religious education qualifications. Alternatively, these institutions may opt to assign teachers from diverse academic disciplines to fill vacancies (Suprapto, 2018). In certain circumstances, a PAI teacher may find themselves teaching at more than two schools concurrently, a situation that has the potential to adversely affect the efficacy of the educational process.

This imbalanced distribution of teachers is indicative of a fundamental challenge in the national education system, namely the absence of systematic teacher requirement planning that incorporates spatial data and aligns with actual field needs. The situation is further compounded by the disparity in the number of positions allocated for religious teachers in the civil servant or PPPK selection process, which is significantly lower compared to other general subjects ((Zendrato et al., 2024). However, in accordance with the mandate of Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, religious education is an integral component of national education that should receive equal attention. This phenomenon has a deleterious effect on the quality and continuity of PAI instruction in public schools. The irregular learning patterns that result from the unpredictable status of teachers in different locations are a significant concern. The implementation of activities aimed at fortifying one's religious character and providing spiritual guidance is often hindered by the scarcity of available time. This shift has the effect of reducing the prominence of religious education in the school curriculum. Furthermore, the provisional status of PAI teachers has been demonstrated to exert an adverse influence on their motivation and professional acumen, consequently engendering inadequate training and professional development. Concomitantly, the provision of quality religious education necessitates the presence of pedagogues who are not merely versed in their respective disciplines; rather, they must also serve as exemplars of moral integrity for their pupils (Irawati et al., 2022).

Finally, multicultural factors have been demonstrated to contribute to the position of PAI. In schools with diverse student populations, the Personal, Academic, and Islamic (PAI) curriculum is frequently regarded as a resource exclusively for Muslim students. Consequently, schools often neglect to prioritize this subject (Hanif, 2017). This situation demonstrates that the limited allocation of time for PAI is indicative of a structural problem, as well as a social and cultural dynamic within the school community.

 posited that the dearth of time allocated for PAI in public schools is not a rudimentary matter, but rather the consequence of a series of interrelated factors. The prevailing national curriculum policies, which prioritize cognitive aspects, the perception that religious education is of diminished importance, the scarcity of permanent PAI teachers, and the multicultural landscape within educational

institutions are the primary factors contributing to this phenomenon. Consequently, PAI is frequently marginalized in educational practice, despite the National Education System Law's normative emphasis on religion's pivotal role in shaping students' character, morals, and ethics.

Consequently, a thorough evaluation of national education policy is imperative to attain a harmonious equilibrium between academic achievement and the cultivation of religious character. The urgent strategic steps that must be taken include extending PAI learning time, strengthening the position of religious education in the curriculum, improving the quality and number of teachers, and integrating religious values into every subject. Consequently, PAI will not merely serve as an administrative supplement; rather, it will evolve into a foundational element in cultivating a generation that is devout, of noble character, and prepared to confront the challenges of the contemporary era.

2. Challenges of Teaching Islam in Public Schools

Religious education in public schools faces challenges from various components, not only from limited learning time that is often not proportional to the breadth of the material. From the students' perspective, the internalization of religious values is less than optimal due to a lack of interest, motivation, and seriousness in attending classes. From the perspective of educators, constraints in creativity and an onerous administrative load frequently diminish the capacity to cultivate meaningful learning experiences. Moreover, the dearth of adequate facilities and infrastructure—particularly in the domain of digital learning media, which has the potential to engage students in the learning process—constitutes an additional impediment. Another salient factor pertains to the cultural and religious diversity of students in public schools. This diversity necessitates a high level of sensitivity during the learning process to avoid causing gaps or potential conflicts. These challenges demonstrate that the implementation of religious education in public schools is confronted not only by technical obstacles but also by psychological, social, and cultural challenges (Anisa et al., 2025). The challenges associated with the implementation of Islamic religious education in public schools encompass a variety of factors, including the constraints imposed by time, the apparent disinterest on the part of students, the absence of adequate digital learning facilities, and the influence of multicultural factors.

Time constraints represent a significant impediment to the implementation of PAI in public schools. Given the limited time allocated for instruction, PAI teachers confront substantial obstacles in their efforts to impart all the fundamental competencies (KD) and learning indicators delineated in the curriculum. These challenges are compounded by the necessity of delivering instruction in a manner that is comprehensive, systematic, and significant. This situation is suboptimal in comparison to the scope of PAI material and learning dimensions, which encompass not only cognitive aspects but also affective and psychomotor aspects (Rouf, 2015). Due to time constraints, PAI teachers predominantly employ lecture-style teaching methods and textual knowledge transfer, with limited opportunities for discussion, reflection, or contextual religious practice. These practices, however, are critical components of religious education. The educational process becomes accelerated, prioritizing the attainment of material objectives rather than cultivating a profound and applicable comprehension of Islamic values. Therefore, students demonstrate a stronger tendency to recall religious concepts than to experience or implement them in their daily lives (Tsalitsa et al., 2020).

Moreover, the limited time allotted for learning has been shown to adversely impact the efficacy of internalizing religious values in PAI lessons. The cultivation of religious character necessitates a prolonged period of consistency and interaction between educators and students, which is impracticable with a mere two hours per week allocated for this purpose. Consequently, time constraints impede the implementation of creative learning methods and media, including project-based approaches and case studies, which have been demonstrated to be more effective in instilling moral and religious values. This discrepancy suggests an inconsistency between the curriculum's emphasis on character development and the practical constraints faced by teachers in the classroom. Specifically, educators often find themselves having to modify their pedagogical approaches to address time limitations, a practice that has the potential to diminish the efficacy of educational outcomes. The pressure to complete the syllabus is the primary factor contributing to this challenge in religious education. Conversely, this discrepancy engenders a disparity between the curriculum's theoretical framework and its practical implementation in the field. The Islamic Religious Education curriculum in the 2013 Curriculum, for example, employs a thematic-integrative approach that prioritizes character development, social skills, and activity-based learning. However, the constraints imposed by time often impede educators from implementing this approach in its totality. A critical evaluation of the thematic-integrative approach reveals that, while it has the potential to enhance students' social skills and character development, its implementation in educational settings is not without limitations. These limitations can result in disparities in learning outcomes among different schools (Nur Widiastuti, Etika Pujianti, 2023)

Conversely, this discrepancy engenders a disparity between the curriculum's theoretical framework and its practical implementation in the field. The Islamic Religious Education curriculum in the 2013 Curriculum, for example, employs a thematic-integrative approach that prioritizes character development, social skills, and activity-based learning. However, the constraints imposed by time often impede educators from implementing this approach in its totality. This predicament gives rise to a paradox in the realm of religious education. While it is expected that this discipline should assume a strategic role in establishing norms, its practical implementation is often encumbered by various obstacles (Marunduri & Wirdati, 2021).

The limited interest exhibited by students in PAI lessons poses a substantial challenge in efforts to cultivate religious character within the context of public schools. In the contemporary context of a modern society that is increasingly diverse and secular, a significant proportion of students perceive religious education as a conventional and inflexible discipline that lacks relevance to their daily lives. Religious studies are frequently regarded as a compendium of theories and doctrines that must be memorized, rather than as pertinent and contextual guidelines for life (Afifudin et al., 2020). Interest in learning is a critical factor in facilitating successful learning outcomes. In the absence of student interest in the material, there is a tendency for students to become passive, lose focus, and even avoid participating in the learning process. A considerable number of students regard religious education as an academic obligation that must be fulfilled rather than as a means of cultivating spiritual and moral values. This phenomenon is further compounded by the employment of monotonous and uninnovative pedagogical approaches, such as one-directional presentations that do not facilitate dialogue or reflection (Kurniawan, 2018).

The waning interest is also influenced by the shift in lifestyle patterns of today's younger generation, who are increasingly focused on global issues, technology, and digital entertainment. The integration of religious material within the socio-cultural context of students has been demonstrated to enhance the appeal and engagement of learning. Religious educators are expected to demonstrate the ability to connect moral teachings with the dynamics of students' lives, thereby facilitating the authentic experience of religious values and their subsequent application (Ahmad, 2019). Furthermore, the dearth of interest may also be attributed to the paucity of role models provided by religious teachers themselves. When there is a discordance between the values taught and the actions of teachers, students may develop distrust or skepticism towards the content presented. The development of religious attitudes is not solely associated with material factors; the presence of figures who can provide inspiration and moral guidance also plays a significant role (Listya, 2024).

In the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and the digital transformation in education, the utilization of digital technology has become imperative to facilitate learning processes that are engaging, contextual, and responsive to the needs of the digital-native generation. In the context of PAI instruction in public schools, the implementation of digital-based learning remains encumbered by numerous challenges, primarily due to the absence of adequate supporting facilities and infrastructure. In the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and the digital transformation in education, the utilization of digital technology has become imperative to facilitate learning processes that are engaging, contextual, and responsive to the needs of the digital-native generation. However, in the context of teaching PAI in public schools, significant challenges persist in implementing digital-based learning, primarily due to the absence of adequate supporting facilities and infrastructure (Ridwan, 2022). Digital learning tools encompass hardware such as computers, projectors, interactive screens, internet networks, and software such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), online quiz applications, interactive videos, and multimedia teaching materials. These facilities empower educators to cultivate an array of pedagogical approaches, encompassing the implementation of flipped classrooms, the utilization of reflective videos, and virtual religious simulations. The efficacy of these methods in fostering heightened emotional engagement, enhanced visual appeal, and augmented conceptual understanding of religious values has been empirically substantiated (Wahyudi, 2025).

However, in a number of public schools, especially in suburban and rural areas, the lack of access to digital technology constitutes a significant obstacle. Contradictions arise because, although the curriculum encourages the use of technology, limitations in facilities and human resources mean that gaps in implementation remain, preventing the consistent measurement of the effectiveness of digital strategies. A significant number of classrooms continue to be under-resourced with technological tools, while internet connectivity is frequently characterized by instability or even complete absence. Teachers who wish to employ digital media frequently encounter technical impediments, such as the absence of sufficient computer labs or inadequate training in the utilization of digital tools for learning. Consequently, the pedagogy of religious education continues to depend predominantly on conventional approaches, including lectures and the memorization of scriptural texts. While these methods have certain merits, in the context of Generation Z and Alpha students, who have grown up with technology, traditional methods are considered less engaging and fail to connect religious material to their real lives. This dynamic has the effect of

widening the chasm between the potential value of religious values and the rigid methods employed to convey them.

In addition to the dearth of infrastructure, another impediment is the absence of institutional support for the development of digital content based on the religious curriculum. For instance, not all schools possess the necessary resources to develop learning media or have access to verified Islamic digital content that aligns with the national curriculum. Consequently, PAI teachers frequently find themselves obliged to devise their own teaching materials with limited resources, or even to depend exclusively on printed textbooks as their sole learning reference (Fuad, 2023).

In a multicultural context, the provision of religious education in public schools faces additional challenges because students come from diverse religious, cultural, and traditional backgrounds. This predicament necessitates that PAI teachers exercise greater caution in the delivery of material, with the objective of respecting differences and averting the creation of a negative impression. The paucity of time frequently results in the neglect of interfaith dialogue and discourse on tolerance issues, despite their critical importance in fostering social harmony within the academic milieu. However, if not administered competently, religious education has the potential to engender psychological distance between students of differing faiths, thereby hindering the educational objective of cultivating tolerance and moderation (Suryawan Bagus Handoko, Cecep Sumarna, 2022).

According to the aforementioned description, it can be concluded that PAI in public schools faces a multitude of challenges. These challenges include time constraints, low student interest, inadequate digital facility support, and diverse multicultural conditions. The temporal limitations imposed on educational endeavours often result in a textual and hasty learning process. Concurrently, the lack of student engagement and interest can impede the internalization of religious values. Conversely, the dearth of technological amenities impedes the development of innovative learning methodologies that are more creative and contextual. Moreover, the heterogeneity of students' backgrounds necessitates that PAI teachers possess the ability to instil religious values while upholding tolerance and social harmony. A critical analysis of the extant literature reveals that, despite the proposal of innovative, inclusive and adaptive strategies, their effectiveness is still influenced by resource constraints, technological access gaps and teacher readiness. Consequently, implementation in the field requires ongoing evaluation and contextual adjustments. Consequently, there is an imperative for the development of more innovative, inclusive, and adaptive strategies. These strategies should aim to ensure that religious education not only fulfils curriculum targets but also genuinely shapes religious, moderate, and relevant character, aligning with the needs of the current generation.

3. Learning Optimization Strategies

A variety of challenges in religious education, particularly those related to time constraints, necessitate the implementation of effective strategies to optimize the learning process. The temporal constraints imposed on learning should not act as an impediment to the realization of the objectives of religious education, which are to foster the comprehensive development of students' character and religious understanding. Consequently, educators and academic institutions are compelled to devise a plethora of innovative and creative methodologies to maximize the available time. These methodologies encompass the utilization of digital technology, the integration of religious values into various academic subjects, the augmentation of

religious-themed extracurricular activities, the implementation of inclusive strategies that cultivate tolerance through a multicultural lens, and the application of contextual and thematic learning methods. Nevertheless, the efficacy of this strategy may be subject to variation depending on the availability of school resources and teacher capacity. For instance, educational institutions in rural areas or with limited facilities may encounter considerable challenges in implementing digital technology. Consequently, the integration of religious values into general lessons or extracurricular activities becomes all the more imperative. Yumarni (2019) study indicates that digital strategies are effective in schools with adequate infrastructure. However, in schools with inadequate equipment, teachers are required to adjust their methods in order to ensure the achievement of learning objectives.

In addressing the challenge of constrained teaching time for PAI in public schools, the utilization of digital technology has emerged as a pivotal innovative strategy. Educational technology provides teachers with the opportunity to deliver lesson material in a manner that is more flexible, engaging, and appropriate for the learning needs of 21st-century students. This approach enables educators to deliver lesson material that extends beyond the confines of traditional classrooms, thereby expanding students' independent and contextual learning experiences. However, it should be noted that the implementation of this technology often encounters significant gaps between theory and practice, especially when teachers do not yet have adequate digital literacy skills or students do not have access to devices and the internet. This creates a contradiction between the potential of digital strategies and the reality on the ground.

Digital technology in PAI learning encompasses a variety of forms, including educational videos, podcasts, interactive quiz applications (e.g., Kahoot or Quizizz), and Learning Management Systems (LMS) platforms such as Google Classroom, Moodle, and Edmodo. This technology facilitates the conveyance of complex information in a simplified and more visual manner, while also enabling students to access the material as needed. This flexibility is of paramount importance, particularly in light of the fact that the average allocation of time for PAI lessons in public schools is a mere two hours per week. This allocation is inadequate for the comprehensive discussion of all fundamental competencies (Wahyudi, 2025). However, the effectiveness of technological solutions depends heavily on schools' and teachers' readiness to manage digital media. Without appropriate training and institutional policies, digital strategies may be less than optimal. Teachers can facilitate online discussions on contemporary Islamic issues, assign digital projects (e.g., creating vlogs or infographics about Islamic values), and create formative assessments through engaging digital media. This method can increase students' emotional and intellectual engagement in religious studies, but it should be noted that this engagement may not be evenly distributed among all students due to differences in ability and access to technology (Kholifah, 2024).

Additionally, digital technology facilitates customization in learning. Teachers can offer materials in various forms (text, audio, video, and quizzes) to suit the varying learning styles of students. This approach has been shown to enhance engagement in religious learning and to make it more responsive to the digital native context of Generations Z and Alpha. This pedagogical approach enables students to not only receive information but also to engage in the creation of meaning. By interpreting, discussing, and contextualizing religious values in their daily lives through familiar media, students can develop their ability to create meaning. A critical analysis shows that teachers who are less skilled at selecting and adapting digital media may find that learning becomes merely a formality, meaning that religious values are not truly

internalized (Salsabila et al., 2022). However, the implementation of digital technology in PAI is not without its own set of challenges, including infrastructure limitations, teachers' digital literacy skills, and a curriculum that is not yet fully aligned with comprehensive technology integration. Consequently, the implementation of supportive policies and professional development programs for educators is imperative to ensure that the integration of technology does not merely become a formality but rather contributes to enhancing the quality and effectiveness of religious education.

One strategy that can overcome the limitations of time and the allocation of PAI lessons in public schools is to integrate religious values into other subjects. This pedagogical approach not only expands the scope of moral and spiritual values instruction, but also engenders a comprehensive and pertinent learning experience for students. In an educational model that emphasizes character building, the integration of religious values is crucial so that religious education is not limited to a sectoral approach that only takes place in religious classrooms. Analysis shows that this integration is most effective when teachers are creative and have interdisciplinary knowledge. However, it can be less effective if teachers rely solely on textbook material without providing relevant real-world context for their students (Rudianto & Mahfud, 2023). This integration underscores the capacity for Islamic values, including honesty, responsibility, justice, compassion, and cooperation, to be seamlessly incorporated into various academic disciplines such as Indonesian Language, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Arts, and Physical Education. For instance, in Indonesian language lessons, educators can opt for literary texts or short stories that convey Islamic moral and ethical messages. In mathematics lessons, the context of zakat or inheritance calculations can be integrated as a component of the application of fractions or algebra. In social studies lessons, the values of social justice and caring for others can be instilled through discussions about community welfare.

This integrative approach not only strengthens the understanding of religious values, but also makes these values significant in the context of students' daily lives. The prevailing paradigm suggests that religious values are no longer regarded as something distinct from daily life or exclusively applicable in places of worship and at home. Instead, these values are increasingly recognized as a foundational framework for thinking and behaving in various academic and social aspects of students' lives. This approach aligns with the concept of character education promoted by the Ministry of Education and Culture through the Character Education Strengthening Movement (PPK), which underscores the pivotal incorporation of religious values into all academic disciplines and school-based initiatives (Faizin, 2017). This pedagogical approach has been shown to positively influence the development of a religious and moral school atmosphere. When educators from all disciplines, including religious teachers, serve as exemplars of moral and spiritual values in their interactions and teaching, a school culture is formed collectively. This approach is designed to promote character development, a fundamental objective of the national education system.

However, the efficacy of integrating religious values into other subjects is contingent upon the pedagogues' comprehension and proficiency in identifying opportunities for integration, as well as their competencies in developing teaching materials that are consistent with the prevailing curriculum. In this regard, interdisciplinary teacher training is necessary to ensure that they can plan lessons that not only focus on cognition but also include affective and spiritual dimensions (Udin Supriadi, Achmad Faqihuddin, 2024).

Religious extracurricular activities are a crucial strategy that can overcome the limitations of PAI learning time in the classroom by complementing and expanding the spiritual guidance process for students. Activities such as Islamic Spirituality (Rohis), weekly recitation, Quran reading training, celebration of Islamic holidays, as well as congregational prayer and morning recitation programs provide broader and more meaningful opportunities for students to directly apply religious values in their daily lives. The effectiveness of this strategy must be evaluated, since student participation levels may vary depending on factors such as motivation, school culture and teacher support (Rofiq, 2018). Extracurricular activities related to religion are voluntary and involve participation, encouraging students to engage actively according to their personal interests and awareness, not just as a requirement in the curriculum. This is very important in the process of internalizing Islamic values because students not only learn the material theoretically but also experience it through real social and spiritual activities. Extracurricular activities related to religion are voluntary and involve participation, encouraging students to engage actively according to their personal interests and awareness, not just as a requirement in the curriculum. This is very important in the process of internalizing Islamic values because students not only learn the material theoretically but also experience it through real social and spiritual activities. According to (Rani Karya Fitri, Syahidah Rena, 2025) active student participation in Rohis, for example, not only deepens religious understanding but also shapes religious attitudes, social responsibility, and leadership skills.

A notable benefit of religious extracurricular activities is their enhanced adaptability and pragmatism. Students can learn through educational methods and practical experiences (learning by doing) that are easier to understand and internalize, especially for the younger generation, who tend to be more responsive to activity-based learning. The implementation of activities such as religious discussions, da'wah training, and social activities such as community service and charity distribution has been identified as a pedagogical strategy that fosters the development of moral sensitivity and social empathy in students. This approach aligns with the comprehensive application of Islamic teachings, emphasizing the integration of spiritual and social dimensions in the educational experience. The role of religious extracurricular activities in establishing a spiritual atmosphere within the school environment is also of significant importance. The integration of religious activities into the fabric of a school's culture can give rise to an environment that is conducive to the development of a religious atmosphere. This, in turn, has the potential to exert a consistent influence on the attitudes and behaviours of students. Schools function not only as places for academic learning, but also as centres for the development of Islamic morals and character. Research findings indicate that schools engaging in religious extracurricular activities tend to have students who demonstrate enhanced levels of discipline, tolerance, and religious awareness (Fahri Agung Nasution, Siti Halimah, 2024).

The provision of Islamic education within the context of multicultural public schools necessitates the implementation of pedagogical approaches that are attuned to the religious, cultural, and traditional diversity characteristic of the student population. This diversity should not be regarded as an impediment; rather, it should be regarded as an opportunity to cultivate values of tolerance, moderation, and mutual respect. One potential solution to this challenge is the integration of multicultural education into Islamic education. Pedagogues can facilitate uncomplicated and age-appropriate interfaith dialogues, such as discussions on the significance of respecting friends of different faiths or introducing Islamic stories that emphasize inclusiveness. While

this strategy is effective in theory, its implementation can be hindered by time constraints and teacher preparedness. Therefore, a flexible approach supported by multicultural training is required (Murtadlo, 2025). Teachers can also apply tolerance-based PjBL methods, for example, by involving students in collaborative activities such as creating posters or educational videos about the values of brotherhood and harmony. This strategy has been demonstrated to enhance religious understanding from a cognitive perspective, while also fostering social awareness and mutual respect among individuals with diverse backgrounds. Consequently, the provision of religious education does not engender an exclusive impression; rather, it functions as a catalyst for the development of social harmony and the cultivation of students' moderate character (Nurlaelah, Deriwanto, Hartini, 2024)

A strategy that has proven effective in addressing time constraints and enhancing the relevance of PAI learning is the implementation of contextual and thematic learning. This approach underscores the relationship between learning materials and students' real-life experiences. A critical analysis shows that the success of this method hinges on the teacher's ability to relate the material to the local context and the students' daily lives. Without these pedagogical skills, contextual learning can lose its meaning and become merely normative. Consequently, the delivery of religious education has evolved from an isolated and abstract model to one that is now interwoven with the social, cultural, and psychological contexts of students. This integration facilitates a more accessible understanding and internalization of the principles and values inherent in Islamic teachings. The pedagogical approach of contextual teaching and learning (CTL) is predicated on the notion that students will attain a more profound comprehension of academic material if they are able to contextualize it within the framework of real-life applications. In the context of PAI, educators can facilitate discussions with students on the values of honesty, hard work, mutual assistance, and responsibility by referencing current events in their immediate environment, whether at home, at school, or within their community. This pedagogical approach fosters a connection between religious teachings and students' daily lives, emphasizing a holistic learning process that encompasses the formation of moral and spiritual awareness (Mulyawan Safwandy Nugraha, Ujang Dedih, 2024).

The thematic method enables educators to integrate diverse competencies and Islamic values into a cohesive theme. For instance, in a thematic unit on "A Clean Environment is Part of Faith," educators can incorporate components of fiqh concerning cleanliness, Islamic ethical principles, and their implementation in a social context. This thematic approach is particularly suitable for use at the primary and lower secondary levels of education, as it supports comprehensive and interdisciplinary learning (Firdhaus & Istiqamah, 2021). A methodology that has demonstrated efficacy in addressing time constraints and enhancing the relevance of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning involves the implementation of contextual and thematic learning techniques. This approach underscores the correlation between learning content and students' real-life experiences. Consequently, the delivery of religious education has evolved to be integrated within the broader social, cultural, and psychological contexts of students, facilitating a more accessible understanding and internalization of Islamic teachings (Thoifah, 2016).

According to the aforementioned description, it can be concluded that PAI learning in public schools with limited time can still be effective if teachers and educational institutions are able to develop innovative, contextual, and inclusive strategies. The integration of digital technology facilitates more flexible and engaging learning experiences, aligning with the characteristics of the digital generation. Additionally, the incorporation of religious values into other subjects creates opportunities for the

internalization of moral and spiritual values beyond the scope of PAI classes. The enhancement of religious extracurricular activities is also of significant importance in providing more meaningful practical experiences, while shaping students' religious character and leadership. In the context of multiculturalism, educators must adopt an approach that fosters tolerance, moderation, and social harmony. This approach ensures that religious education does not become exclusive but rather strengthens communal bonds within a diverse society. The integration of contextual and thematic learning methodologies facilitates the alignment of Islamic values with students' real-life experiences, thereby enhancing the comprehensibility and internalization of these values. These strategies demonstrate that time constraints do not impede the primary objective of religious education, which is to cultivate religious, tolerant, and resilient characters.

Conclusion

Religious education in public schools is currently facing significant challenges, primarily due to limitations in the curriculum that hinder the effective inculcation of religious values in students. A review of the extant research indicates that these obstacles stem from national curriculum policies that prioritize academic subjects, a low perception of the importance of religious education, and an imbalance in the distribution of religious teachers. The existing challenges are further compounded by a number of factors, including waning student interest, a paucity of digital learning facilities, and the multicultural reality in schools. Religious and cultural diversity often engenders an exclusive impression in PAI (Islamic Education) learning. To address this issue, the article proposes a solution-oriented approach, which includes the utilization of digital technology, the integration of religious values into other subjects, the strengthening of religious extracurricular activities, the application of contextual and thematic methods, and the implementation of multicultural strategies that emphasize tolerance and inclusiveness. The implementation of these strategies ensures the continued efficacy, contextual relevance, and significance of religious education, thereby contributing to the enhancement of social harmony. Consequently, a collaborative effort among education policymakers, teachers, and schools is imperative to establish a religious education system that is responsive, innovative, and relevant to the needs of the current generation.

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