

## ETHNOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY

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### Abstract

*This article aimed to explore the theoretical basis of ethnopolitical influences on the transformation of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum, focusing on integrating multicultural awareness and deep learning approaches. The study used a comprehensive literature review and conceptual analysis to examine how ethnic identities and sociopolitical dynamics shaped curriculum reform in pluralistic societies. The findings showed that incorporating ethnopolitical perspectives into curriculum development fostered inclusive pedagogy that respected cultural diversity while promoting critical, reflective, and meaningful learning experiences. The framework highlighted the need for curricula that not only transmitted religious knowledge but also built social cohesion and character among diverse student populations. The study identified challenges in balancing local cultural identities with national unity and recommended flexible, context-sensitive educational policies and teacher training. Overall, this article contributed to understanding how ethnopolitics informed curriculum innovation, ensuring Islamic education remained relevant and responsive to societal complexities.*

*Keywords: Ethnopolitics; Curriculum Transformatio; Islamic Religious Education; Deep Learning; Multiculturalism*

### Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dasar teoretis pengaruh etnopolitik dalam transformasi kurikulum Pendidikan Agama Islam, dengan fokus pada integrasi kesadaran multikultural dan pendekatan pembelajaran mendalam (deep learning). Penelitian ini menggunakan kajian pustaka komprehensif dan analisis konseptual untuk menelaah bagaimana identitas etnis dan dinamika sosial-politik membentuk reformasi kurikulum di masyarakat yang pluralistik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penggabungan perspektif etnopolitik dalam pengembangan kurikulum mendorong pedagogi inklusif yang menghargai keberagaman budaya sekaligus mengembangkan kemampuan berpikir kritis, reflektif, dan pembelajaran bermakna. Kerangka ini menekankan pentingnya kurikulum yang tidak hanya menyampaikan pengetahuan agama, tetapi juga membangun kohesi sosial dan karakter peserta didik yang beragam. Penelitian mengidentifikasi tantangan dalam menyeimbangkan identitas budaya lokal dengan persatuan nasional serta merekomendasikan kebijakan pendidikan yang fleksibel dan pelatihan guru yang kontekstual. Secara keseluruhan, artikel ini memberikan kontribusi pemahaman

bagaimana etnopolitik dapat menjadi dasar inovasi kurikulum agar Pendidikan Agama Islam tetap relevan dan responsif terhadap kompleksitas sosial masa kini.

Kata kunci: Etnopolitik; Transformasi Kurikulum; Pendidikan Agama Islam; Pembelajaran Mendalam; Multikulturalisme

## **Introduction**

Recent curriculum transformation in Indonesia has been marked by the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, a progressive educational framework that emphasizes learning freedom and flexibility in designing educational processes tailored to local needs and contexts. This curriculum represents a significant departure from previous standardized, rigid curricula by empowering schools and teachers to innovate and adapt their teaching strategies, thereby fostering student-centered learning environments (Kemendikbud-Ristek, 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum aims to address the evolving demands of the 21st century by promoting adaptive and contextualized learning that respects Indonesia's vast socio-cultural diversity. Given the country's complex demographic landscape, which encompasses multiple ethnicities, languages, and cultural traditions, this adaptive approach seeks to make education more relevant and meaningful for all learners.

In tandem with this curricular shift, there has been a growing emphasis on deep learning approaches. Unlike traditional methods focused primarily on rote memorization and surface-level understanding, deep learning emphasizes cognitive engagement that is profound and sustained. This includes connecting concepts across disciplines, personalizing meaning, and fostering higher-order thinking skills such as critical analysis, creativity, and reflection (Alhamuddin et al., 2023; Al-Jayyousi et al., 2022). Such an approach is crucial for preparing students to navigate and solve complex, real-world problems that demand more than factual knowledge. It aligns with global educational trends that prioritize skills for lifelong learning, adaptability, and innovation, equipping students to thrive amid rapid technological, social, and environmental changes (Fullan et al., 2018). (Carnoy, 2002; Sklar, 2018) Therefore, the integration of the Merdeka Curriculum with deep learning approaches represents a comprehensive strategy to transform Indonesian education into a system that is not only academically rigorous but also socially and culturally responsive.

However, the implementation of this curriculum transformation cannot be separated from Indonesia's complex socio-political and cultural context, which is characterized by its pluralistic and multiethnic nature. Indonesia is home to hundreds of ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, traditions, and cultural values, making education a critical arena where these diverse identities intersect

(Hefner, 2016, 2021). Ethnopolitics defined as the interaction between ethnic identities and power dynamics within a society (Horowitz, 1985; Wimmer, 2013)(Usman et al., 2022; Vygotsky, 1978) plays a crucial role in shaping education policies and curriculum implementation, as these policies must navigate the sensitivities of ethnic representation and regional autonomy. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, which holds a strategic function in shaping students' moral character, religious understanding, and social identity, the influences of ethnopolitics become even more pronounced. The curriculum is expected not only to transmit core religious teachings but also to accommodate cultural diversity by integrating local wisdom and respecting the plurality of students' backgrounds (Banks, 2006). This creates a complex challenge for curriculum developers and educators to design learning experiences that are inclusive and culturally relevant, thereby making education more meaningful and engaging. Furthermore, such a curriculum must actively promote social cohesion, mutual respect, and tolerance among diverse student populations to support the formation of citizens who are adaptive, socially responsible, and capable of contributing positively to a democratic and plural society (Banks & Banks, 2010). Without sensitivity to ethnopolitical dynamics, curriculum implementation risks marginalizing minority groups, reinforcing stereotypes, or even exacerbating social divisions, which can undermine national unity and the overall goals of educational transformation.

The urgency of this research arises from the need to understand how ethnopolitics affects the transformation of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum, particularly in applying a holistic and contextual deep learning approach. Previous studies have largely focused on technical aspects of curriculum and instruction without thoroughly exploring the influence of ethnic socio-political contexts on education (Alhamuddin et al., 2020; Alhamuddin, 2019; Banks, 2006). Hence, this study aims to fill this gap by theoretically examining how ethnopolitical dynamics can determine the success or challenges of curriculum transformation. Such understanding is expected to yield alternative solutions that strengthen the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum to be more responsive to Indonesia's cultural and social diversity.

This study seeks to develop a conceptual framework that integrates ethnopolitical perspectives into the transformation of Islamic Religious Education curriculum towards deep learning. Additionally, it intends to contribute to the development of inclusive and equitable education policies and to support teacher capacity building in designing adaptive learning suited to local contexts. The

significance of this research is both academic, enriching discourse in curriculum studies and Islamic education, and practical, serving as a reference for policymakers and educators in designing curricula that address pluralism and contemporary social dynamics

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employed a quantitative approach (Miles, 1986; Takona, 2024) with a descriptive survey design aimed at assessing Islamic Religious Education teachers' understanding and responses to the transformation of the Merdeka Curriculum towards a deep learning approach. The research was conducted during the odd semester of the 2024/2025 academic year in several secondary schools in West Java that have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum.

The target population consisted of Islamic Religious Education teachers as the primary actors in curriculum implementation. The study sample was purposively selected, consisting of 30 teachers based on their teaching experience and involvement with the new curriculum. Data collection was carried out through a structured questionnaire survey that was validated to measure teachers' comprehension, acceptance, and challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and the deep learning approach. Documentary study of curriculum documents was also conducted to complement the survey data.

Data analysis employed descriptive statistics to present quantitative survey results, including frequency distribution, percentages, and mean scores. The instrument's validity was ensured through content validity testing, and reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to guarantee internal consistency. The study adhered to ethical research principles by maintaining respondent confidentiality and obtaining informed consent prior to data collection (Creswell & Path, 2016; Hancock, 2002).

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Teachers' Perspectives on Curriculum Change**

The survey results indicate that the majority of teachers strongly support and desire changes in the curriculum, particularly regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the deep learning approach. Teachers recognize that traditional learning models focused heavily on rote memorization and superficial content mastery are no longer effective in meeting the demands of 21<sup>st</sup>-century education. They view the Merdeka Curriculum as a timely response to

the need for more flexible, contextual, and skill-oriented learning that develops students' critical, reflective, and creative thinking abilities. The flexibility offered by this curriculum allows teachers to innovate their teaching methods, tailor content to local needs and conditions, and create more meaningful and applicable learning experiences. However, this positive attitude also comes with the need for adequate training and resources to enable effective and consistent implementation in classrooms. Overall, teachers' positive outlook reflects their readiness to support the curriculum transformation, although practical challenges remain to be addressed.

**Table 1.** Indications of Curriculum Change Needs Based on Teacher Responses

<b>Challenge/Statement</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Indication of Need for Curriculum Change</b>
Lack of teacher training in character education	50%	Yes (suggests need for curriculum and training reform)
Too much content to cover	45.5%	Yes (indicates curriculum overload)
Not enough time for interactive methods	50%	Yes (points to time constraints in current curriculum)
Overloaded curriculum	31.8%	Yes (directly calls for curriculum change)
No clear evaluation support for character values	36.4%	Yes (indicates need for revised evaluation methods)
Other (please specify)	4.5%	Not specific

The survey findings reveal a strong teacher endorsement of the Merdeka Curriculum's shift toward a deep learning approach, highlighting an important paradigm change from traditional rote-based instruction to a more meaningful, skill-oriented pedagogy. This aligns with global educational trends advocating for 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, and reflection, which are essential to prepare learners for complex real-world challenges (Sehati et al., 2024). The recognition by teachers that rote memorization is insufficient reflects a growing awareness of the limitations of surface learning, which often results in fragmented knowledge that fails to foster deep understanding or transferable skills (Njui, 2017; UNICEF, 2019).

However, despite this positive disposition, the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum hinges on addressing key systemic issues. Foremost among these is the provision of adequate professional development and resource support for teachers. Without continuous training tailored to the deep learning philosophy and practical classroom strategies, teachers risk reverting to familiar, content-heavy methods, undermining curriculum objectives (Nurdin et al., 2023; Ornstein, 2017; Tyler, 2000). Additionally, disparities in school infrastructure and learning

materials across regions can hinder equitable adoption, exacerbating educational inequality (OECD, 2020).

A critical challenge lies in balancing curriculum flexibility with sufficient guidance to ensure consistent quality across diverse educational contexts. While autonomy empowers teachers to contextualize learning, it may also lead to variability in implementation unless supported by clear frameworks and monitoring mechanisms (Alhamuddin et al., 2020). This calls for a systemic approach that integrates teacher capacity-building, collaborative professional learning communities, and ongoing formative assessment to refine pedagogical practices (Im, 2013; Sarah et al., 2019). To overcome these challenges, education policymakers and stakeholders should prioritize sustained investment in teacher training programs that focus on deep learning methodologies, culturally responsive pedagogy, and effective classroom management. Additionally, developing accessible digital and print resources aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum can enhance teaching and learning experiences (UNESCO, 1972, 2004). Strengthening partnerships between schools, local communities, and education authorities can also facilitate sharing of best practices and contextual innovations, fostering a supportive ecosystem for curriculum transformation.

Teacher enthusiasm for curriculum reform is a positive indicator of potential success; however, enthusiasm alone is insufficient to guarantee effective implementation. Practical barriers, such as limited infrastructure, unequal access to teaching resources, and insufficient teacher capacity, can significantly impede the translation of curriculum intentions into classroom realities (Zuhdi, 2006a). In Indonesia's vast and diverse educational context, schools in remote or under-resourced areas may struggle more to adapt to the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility and learner-centered pedagogy (OECD, 2020).

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic, multi-faceted approach. Flexibility in curriculum design allows teachers to tailor learning to local contexts, but without structured and ongoing professional development, monitoring, and resource support, such flexibility risks inconsistent application and widening educational disparities (Alhamuddin, Alhamuddin, Bukhori, 2016). Therefore, systemic policies should balance autonomy with clear guidance and accountability frameworks, ensuring that schools maintain educational quality while adapting to local needs.

Investment in infrastructure such as digital tools, learning spaces, and access to relevant materials is critical to support innovative teaching methods aligned with deep learning (UNESCO, 2004). Capacity-building programs must be continuous and context-sensitive, enabling teachers not only to understand deep learning concepts theoretically but also to apply them effectively in diverse classrooms (Alhamuddin et al., 2023; Alhamuddin & Hamdani, 2018).

Collaboration among stakeholders including education authorities, teacher associations, and community leaders is vital to create a supportive ecosystem that fosters knowledge sharing and peer learning (Hattie, 2015). Such collaboration can also help address socio-cultural challenges that influence curriculum uptake, particularly in multiethnic regions where ethnopolitical dynamics may impact educational practice (Banks, 2006). A comprehensive strategy that integrates curriculum flexibility with structured support systems is essential for realizing the Merdeka Curriculum's deep learning goals equitably across Indonesia. This approach can bridge the gap between teacher enthusiasm and actual classroom transformation, contributing to more effective and inclusive education outcomes nationwide.

### **The Role of Ethnopolitics in Transforming Islamic Religious Education Curriculum**

The transformation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the subject of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), is closely tied to ethnopolitical dynamics in Indonesia a nation marked by rich ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. Ethnopolitics, defined as the interaction between ethnic identities and socio-political power structures, significantly influences how curricula are developed and localized to be culturally relevant and sensitive to students' diverse backgrounds.

Survey findings indicate that teachers often experience tension when navigating between local cultural values and national religious standards. For instance, 45.5% of respondents cited "too much material to cover" as a challenge, with many noting the pressure to deliver centrally standardized Islamic teachings while also accommodating local wisdom and customs, such as *adat istiadat* or community-based religious practices. Additionally, 50% reported a lack of time for interactive methods, which limits their ability to contextualize lessons within students' cultural environments. A concrete example of ethnopolitical consideration in the Merdeka Curriculum is the encouragement for project-based learning (PBL) on themes such as "Religious Harmony in My Community." In one case from Central Kalimantan, a PAI teacher guided students to explore interethnic cooperation

between Dayak and Malay Muslim communities during religious celebrations. Such activities not only integrate religious values with local practices but also reinforce mutual respect and national identity.

These findings affirm that a curriculum sensitive to ethnopolitical factors enhances PAI by fostering respect for diversity while promoting social cohesion. This aligns with the principles of multicultural and character education, which emphasize the ability of students to live harmoniously in a pluralistic society. Therefore, addressing ethnopolitical challenges in curriculum implementation is key to achieving both meaningful learning and national integration.

The transformation of the Merdeka Curriculum within Islamic Religious Education presents a complex challenge shaped deeply by Indonesia's ethnopolitical landscape. Indonesia's pluralistic society comprised of diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious groups—necessitates curricula that are not only pedagogically sound but also culturally and politically sensitive (Hefner, 2016, 2021). Ethnopolitics, defined as the interplay between ethnic identities and socio-political power structures (Alhamuddin, 2024; Alifuddin et al., 2021), inevitably influences curriculum design and implementation, especially in subjects like IRE that are closely tied to identity formation and moral development.

The key challenge, as reported by teachers, lies in balancing inclusivity of diverse ethnic and cultural identities with the maintenance of core religious values intrinsic to Islamic education. This tension reflects broader debates in multicultural education, where the goal is to respect and accommodate cultural differences without diluting fundamental principles (Banks, 2006). While the Merdeka Curriculum's flexibility offers opportunities to contextualize learning and make it more relevant to students lived experiences, it demands educators to skillfully navigate ethnopolitical sensitivities to avoid alienation or conflict among diverse student populations.

Critically, failure to address ethnopolitical factors risks reinforcing social fragmentation or marginalization of minority groups within educational settings (Tony Becher & Stuart Maclure, 2024). Conversely, a curriculum that is ethnopolitical aware fosters social cohesion by promoting mutual respect, intercultural dialogue, and shared national identity, consistent with the goals of character education (Banks, 2006). Such a curriculum aligns with the principles of multicultural education, which emphasize equity, respect for diversity, and the development of students' capacities to engage constructively in pluralistic societies (Apple, 2004; Mohamad et al., 2015; Ornstein, 2017). From an implementation

perspective, the successful integration of ethno-political awareness requires comprehensive teacher training that equips educators with intercultural competence and conflict sensitivity (Moslimany et al., 2024a). Policy frameworks should support curriculum adaptations that reflect local cultural contexts while upholding national educational standards. Additionally, involving community stakeholders—including religious leaders and ethnic representatives—in curriculum development can enhance legitimacy and acceptance, mitigating potential tensions (Moslimany et al., 2024b, 2024c).

Ethno-politics serves as a vital framework for understanding and guiding the transformation of Islamic Religious Education within the Merdeka Curriculum. Indonesia's diverse ethnic and cultural landscape presents both opportunities and challenges in educational reform, particularly in subjects like IRE that intersect with identity, values, and social cohesion (Banks, 2006; Shelton & Lisa Campo Engelstein, 2022). Viewing curriculum transformation through the ethno-political lens acknowledges that education is not merely a neutral transmission of knowledge but a socially embedded process deeply influenced by power relations and cultural identities (Joseph, 2015).

Effective management of ethno-political dynamics involves recognizing and addressing the diverse cultural backgrounds of students while maintaining the integrity of religious teachings. Such management enriches curriculum content by incorporating multicultural perspectives and culturally relevant pedagogy that resonate with students' lived experiences (James Miles, 2020). Pedagogically, it encourages teachers to foster inclusive classrooms where dialogue, respect, and critical engagement with cultural and religious diversity are prioritized (Banks, 2006). Beyond academic outcomes, the ethno-political approach aligns with Indonesia's broader societal goals by promoting harmony and national unity. In a nation marked by pluralism, education plays a key role in mitigating ethnic tensions and fostering a shared sense of citizenship and belonging (Zuhdi, 2006b). By integrating ethno-political awareness into curriculum design and delivery, schools become spaces that nurture character building, social integration, and mutual respect foundations for peaceful coexistence in diverse societies (Hendawi et al., 2024; Sklar, 2018).

Ethno-politics is not merely an abstract theoretical concept but a practical and indispensable element in the successful transformation of Indonesia's Islamic Religious Education curriculum (Alifuddin, 2021). Given Indonesia's rich tapestry of ethnicities, languages, and cultural practices, failing to consider ethno-political

dynamics risks alienating diverse student populations and undermining social cohesion. Effective management of these dynamics involves integrating culturally responsive teaching methods, recognizing students' varied backgrounds, and balancing the preservation of religious values with respect for pluralism. Such an approach ensures that the Merdeka Curriculum goes beyond fostering intellectual growth to actively promoting social harmony and inclusivity. By doing so, it supports the development of a resilient national identity that embraces diversity as a strength rather than a challenge. This alignment between curriculum content, pedagogy, and ethno-political realities helps cultivate generations of learners who are not only knowledgeable but also empathetic, socially responsible, and prepared to contribute positively to Indonesia's pluralistic society. Ultimately, ethno-politics-informed curriculum transformation is critical to nurturing a cohesive and sustainable national community that can thrive amid diversity and complexity.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of teachers express strong support for the transformation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly its emphasis on the deep learning approach, which is seen as more relevant for developing students' critical, reflective, and creative thinking skills. However, a major challenge lies in the need for adequate training and resources to enable teachers to effectively implement the curriculum. Additionally, ethno-politics plays a significant role in the transformation of Islamic Religious Education curriculum, requiring the accommodation of ethnic and cultural diversity in an inclusive manner without compromising religious values. Proper management of these ethno-political aspects can enhance social cohesion and strengthen students' character within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Recommendations for future research include conducting more in-depth studies on practical strategies for managing ethno-political dynamics in classroom settings across diverse ethnic regions, as well as exploring the role of teacher training and policy support in accelerating and strengthening the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum based on deep learning principles. Further research could also examine the long-term impact of curriculum transformation on social integration and character development among students.

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