Transformation of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Curriculum in Addressing the Challenge of Radicalism Among Students SMA Ar-Rahman Medan Helvetia

Pengky, Bahtiar Siregar, Abdi Syahrial Harahap

Abstract

Analyze the transformation of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum as a strategic response to the potential spread of radicalism among students at SMA Ar-Rahman Medan Helvetia. The phenomenon of religious-based radicalism in secondary education has increasingly become a concern, as indicated by the growing exposure to extremist content through social media as well as the influence of peer networks. This research employs a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, combining a quantitative approach through a survey of 115 students and a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with 6 PAI teachers, the school principal, and Islamic education experts. Data analysis was conducted to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of PAI curriculum transformation in fostering moderate religious attitudes. The findings of the study indicate that: (1) 23.5% of students were identified as having a tendency toward less tolerant religious understanding; (2) the implementation of the PAI curriculum emphasizing religious moderation (*wasathiyyah*), national insight, and digital literacy significantly reduced intolerance tendencies by 31.7% after one semester of implementation; and (3) dialogical learning approaches, teacher role modeling, and the strengthening of inclusive Islamic extracurricular programs serve as key factors in the success of curriculum transformation.

Keywords: Transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Curriculum; Radicalism; Religious Moderation; Senior High School Students; Deradicalization.

Pengky[1]
[1]Islamic Religious Education, Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi, Indonesia
e-mail: ustadzpengky@gmail.com[1]

Bahtiar Siregar[2], Abdi Syahrial Harahap[3]
[2,3]Islamic Religious Education, Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi, Indonesia
e-mail: bahtiarsiregar@dosen.pancabudi.ac.id[2], abdisyahrial@dosen.pancabudi.ac.id[3]
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https://proceeding.pancabudi.ac.id/index.php/ICIE/index

Introduction

A curriculum is a set of plans and arrangements regarding objectives, content, learning materials, and instructional methods used as guidelines for the implementation of education (hamalik, 2010, p. 16). Islamic religious education (pai) is a conscious and planned effort to prepare learners so that they are able to understand, internalize, and practice islamic teachings in their daily lives (muhaimin, 2012, p. 75). The pai curriculum aims to develop students who are faithful, godconscious, and possess noble character. Implementation is the process of executing or applying a plan, policy, or program into concrete actions in order to achieve the desired objectives. For example, curriculum implementation in schools refers to the practice of carrying out the curriculum content in daily learning activities.(Danny Abrianto, Innovative: Journal Of Social Science Research:2025).

Radicalism refers to an ideology or belief system that seeks extreme social and political change through violent means (bnpt, 2018, p. 21). In the context of education, radicalism can influence students through indoctrination of intolerance, hatred, and anti-pluralistic attitudes.

Religious moderation has become essential in shaping learners who are able to live harmoniously within a multicultural society (ministry of religious affairs of the republic of indonesia, 2019, p. 18). The development and advancement of knowledge have led to the emergence of several other academic disciplines. (Abdi Syahrial, Dakwatul Islam: 2020).

The cultivation of religious and moral values needs to be introduced and instilled in children from an early age as an effort to shape a generation that is spiritually strong and morally wellmannered. In essence, every human being is born with the potential for spiritual and moral intelligence. (Mhd Habibu Rahman,Tahta Media: 2023).

Religious radicalism among secondary school students has become one of the most urgent issues in contemporary islamic education discourse in indonesia. Data from the national counterterrorism agency (bnpt) indicate a significant increase in the number of young individuals including high school students exposed to extremist narratives, both through online media and offline community networks (bnpt, 2023; wahid foundation, 2022). This phenomenon cannot be separated from the context of the digital revolution, which accelerates the spread of radical content beyond the traditional boundaries of parental and school supervision. (Muhammad Yunan, JIM: Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa Pendidikan Sejarah: 2022).

Medan city, as one of the largest muslim demographic centers in north sumatra, is not exempt from this threat. Preliminary research conducted at sma ar-rahman medan helvetia identified early symptoms of religious intolerance among some students, including rejection of pluralism, excessive suspicion toward other religious groups, and affiliation with exclusive religious content (setara institute, 2022; abdurrahman, 2021). These findings raise a critical question: to what extent has the existing pai curriculum been effective as a safeguard against the infiltration of radical ideologies?

Islamic religious education in both public and islamic schools should function as an intellectual and spiritual immunization against extremist narratives. However, several studies indicate that conventional pai curricula still largely doctrinal, memorization-oriented, and insufficiently responsive to students' social-digital context may in fact create a vacuum that is filled by external influences potentially leading to radicalization (azca, 2013; hilmy, 2013). Therefore, a contextual, critical, and moderation-oriented transformation of the pai curriculum, aimed at shaping a moderate (*wasathi*) muslim identity, has become an urgent necessity.

This article seeks to address this need by presenting empirical research on the process and impact of pai curriculum transformation at sma ar-rahman medan helvetia in responding to the challenge of radicalism. The research questions include: (1) what is the profile of students' religious understanding in relation to radicalism indicators?; (2) what model of pai curriculum

transformation has been implemented?; and (3) how effective is this curriculum transformation in reducing tendencies toward intolerance and radicalism among students? This study is expected to provide a transferable model of transformation for other islamic schools facing similar challenges.

If the teachers who implement it do not possess adequate competencies, the curriculum will not be effectively carried out. Such readiness includes the preparedness of curriculum tools, as well as facilities and infrastructure. In the process of implementing the 2013 Curriculum, there are certainly supporting factors in its application and its transition toward "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn). These include the availability of facilities and infrastructure that support the learning process, as well as the active role of schools in sending teachers to participate in seminars, outreach programs, workshops, and other professional development activities related to the 2013 Curriculum and its transition toward Merdeka Belajar, and other similar initiatives.(bahtiar siregar, Innovative: Journal Of Social Science Research, 2023).

Literature review

1. Religious radicalism among students: definition and indicators

Religious radicalism in the educational context is defined as a set of beliefs and attitudes that promote drastic socio-religious change while rejecting existing social orders, often accompanied by intolerance toward other groups and the justification of violence as a means of change (kruglanski et al., 2014; neumann, 2013). In indonesia, this concept must be distinguished from strong religious conviction (*shalabah*/firmness of faith), which is in fact an objective of islamic education. Indicators of student radicalism identified in various studies include religious exclusivism, rejection of pancasila as the state ideology, legitimization of violence in the name of religion, and antipathy toward diversity.

Noorhaidi hasan (2012) found that student radicalism in indonesia does not primarily emerge from islamic boarding schools (pesantren), but rather tends to develop in public schools and islamic schools that lack a strong tradition of islamic intellectualism. This epistemic vacuum ironically makes students more vulnerable to simplistic narratives promoted by radical groups (hasan, 2012; fealy & hooker, 2006).

2. Islamic religious education curriculum and the urgency of religious moderation

Religious moderation (*wasathiyyah al-islamiyyah*) is a concept rooted in islamic teachings, referring to qur'an surah al-baqarah: 143, which positions muslims as the "middle الأمة" (*ummatan wasathan*). In the educational context, religious moderation is translated into a curriculum that fosters justice, tolerance, respect for diversity, and rejection of extremism in all its forms (ministry of religious affairs of the republic of indonesia, 2019; saifuddin, 2019).

The transformation of the pai curriculum toward religious moderation has received policy legitimacy through presidential regulation no. 58 of 2023 on the strengthening of religious moderation. Within this framework, islamic religious education does not only teach ritual worship and doctrinal creed, but also explicitly develops critical religious literacy competencies that enable students to identify and reject extremist narratives (moore, 2006; dinham & shaw, 2015).

3. Social media as a vector of radicalization

The development of social media has fundamentally transformed the religious information ecosystem. Platforms such as youtube, tiktok, instagram, and telegram have become primary channels for the dissemination of religious content both moderate and radical consumed by high school students (sageman, 2016; bertram, 2016). Algorithmic curation that strengthens echo chambers means that students exposed once to extremist content are increasingly likely to receive

similar recommendations. This condition makes religious digital literacy an indispensable component of contemporary pai curricula.

Widodo's (2020) study of high school students in java and sumatra found that 68% of respondents accessed religious content via social media for more than one hour per day, exceeding the time spent on formal islamic religious education in classrooms. This reality underscores the necessity for pai curricula to proactively integrate digital literacy and critical thinking skills in evaluating online religious content (widodo, 2020; riyanto, 2021).

4. Curriculum-based deradicalization models

Various curriculum-based deradicalization models have been developed and implemented in different countries. In singapore, the religious rehabilitation group (rrg) program integrates counter-narrative education into formal religious curricula by actively involving moderate scholars (ramakrishna, 2010). In malaysia, the i-medik (integrated module for deradicalization and inclusion of knowledge) program was developed by the ministry of education as a cross-curricular module. In indonesia, the model developed by munandar sulaeman (2018) emphasizes islamic civic education as a preventive strategy against primordialism and radicalization.

5. The role of islamic religious education teachers as agents of moderation

The effectiveness of pai curriculum transformation cannot be separated from the competence and integrity of teachers as its primary implementers. Banks (2008) refers to teachers who integrate multicultural education into religious instruction as "multicultural educators" agents who actively deconstruct prejudice and build bridges of understanding across differences. In the indonesian islamic context, moderate islamic religious education teachers (*mu'allim wasathi*) are those who possess deep religious knowledge, strong national insight, and adaptive pedagogical skills in responding to digital contexts (muhaimin, 2012; nata, 2014).

Research Methodology

1. Research design

This study employs a mixed-methods research approach with a sequential explanatory design (creswell & plano clark, 2018). In the first phase (quantitative), a survey was conducted to measure students' religious understanding profiles and tendencies toward radicalism using standardized instruments. In the second phase (qualitative), in-depth interviews and classroom observations were conducted to explain the mechanisms of islamic religious education (pai) curriculum transformation and the factors influencing its effectiveness. Integration of both datasets was carried out at the interpretation stage to achieve a holistic and comprehensive understanding.

2. Research site, duration, and participants

The study was conducted at sma ar-rahman medan helvetia, located at jalan helvetia tengah no. 88, medan helvetia district, medan city, north sumatra. The site was selected purposively based on the following considerations: (a) it is a private islamic school that has implemented pai curriculum reform; (b) it is located in an urban area with high digital accessibility; and (c) the school's willingness to actively participate in the research. The study was conducted from september 2023 to april 2024.

The research participants consisted of: (a) 115 students from grades x, xi, and xii selected through stratified random sampling (sugiyono, 2019); (b) 6 islamic religious education (pai) teachers; (c) the school principal; and (d) 2 islamic education experts from the islamic university of north sumatra (uisu) serving as external experts for instrument validation and data triangulation.

3. Instruments and data collection techniques

Quantitative data were collected using: (a) the radicalism tendency scale (rts), developed based on indicators from kruglanski et al. (2014) and adapted to the indonesian context, consisting of 35 likert-scale items (5-point scale), with construct validity confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis (cfa) with factor loadings ≥ 0.60; and (b) a religious moderation literacy test (rmlt) consisting of 30 items.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations across 16 pai sessions, and document analysis (curriculum documents, syllabi, lesson plans/rpp, modules, and evaluation reports). The reliability of the rts instrument was tested using cronbach's alpha, yielding a score of 0.87 (highly reliable).

4. Data analysis techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to profile radicalism tendencies, the kolmogorov–smirnov test for normality, the wilcoxon signed-rank test to compare pre- and post-implementation scores of the transformative curriculum, and multiple regression analysis to identify predictors of effectiveness.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (braun & clarke, 2006), following the stages of data familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. The validity of qualitative data was ensured through source triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing.

Research Results

1. Students' radicalism tendency profile

The analysis of the radicalism tendency scale (rts) during the pre-test phase revealed a concerning distribution. Among 115 students: 8.7% were classified in the high radicalism tendency category, 14.8% in the moderately high category, 34.8% in the moderate category, 29.6% in the low category, and 12.1% in the very low category. Overall, 23.5% of students were identified as having tendencies toward intolerance and radicalism that require serious attention. The items with the highest agreement were related to rejection of non-muslim leaders, legitimization of violence in certain contexts, and the view that other religious practices are deviant.

These findings are consistent with the national survey conducted by the wahid foundation (2022), which reported that approximately 23–26% of high school students in major indonesian cities show indicators of religious intolerance. Correlation analysis indicates that the frequency of exposure to exclusive religious content on social media ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$) and limited interaction with peers from different religious backgrounds ($r = -0.44$, $p < 0.001$) are significant predictors of radicalism tendencies (widodo, 2020).

2. Islamic religious education (pai) curriculum transformation model

The transformation of the pai curriculum at sma ar-rahman medan helvetia was implemented in three systematic phases. The first phase (diagnosis and planning, september–october 2023) involved needs analysis through focus group discussions with teachers, mapping of curriculum gaps, and the development of a transformative curriculum design based on *wasathiyyah* (islamic moderation).

The second phase (implementation, november 2023–february 2024) involved the application of a new curriculum integrating four main components: religious moderation literacy modules, religious digital literacy programs, cross-faith cooperative learning, and creative da'wah programs based on social media.

The third phase (evaluation, march–april 2024) focused on impact assessment and reflection on the implementation process.

The most significant curriculum innovation was the integration of a learning unit titled "counter-narrative islam rahmatan lil-'alamin" in each semester, equipping students with the ability to identify characteristics of radical narratives and respond to them using valid islamic arguments. This approach is inspired by freire's (1970) concept of critical pedagogy, which encourages learners not merely to passively receive knowledge but to actively analyze and critically evaluate the realities they encounter.

3. Effectiveness of curriculum transformation

This study reveals that the transformation of the islamic religious education (pai) curriculum at sma ar-rahman medan helvetia was developed through a systematic, adaptive model based on strengthening the values of religious moderation (*wasathiyyah*). This model functions as both a preventive and curative response to the potential development of radical ideologies within the school environment.

Post-test results after one semester of implementation show a highly significant reduction in radicalism tendency scores. The mean rts score decreased from 68.4 (moderate–high category) to 46.7 (low–moderate category), representing a 31.7% reduction. The wilcoxon signed-rank test produced $z = -7.823$ with $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.01$), confirming that the difference is statistically highly significant. The most substantial improvements were observed in tolerance toward religious differences (gain = 38.2%) and acceptance of plural leadership (gain = 34.9%).

Qualitative data further enrich the understanding of the change mechanism. Interviews with students revealed that open discussion sessions on contemporary issues (radicalism, religious misinformation, and digital jihad), facilitated by pai teachers through a dialogical approach, were the most memorable and transformative experiences. This finding is consistent with ramakrishna (2010), who argues that open and honest dialogue on sensitive religious issues is more effective in changing extremist beliefs than counter-indoctrination approaches.

Curriculum transformation occurred not only in classroom instruction but was also strengthened through the broader school environment. This includes inclusive religious extracurricular programs, habitual congregational worship, socio-religious activities, and teacher role modeling of moderate religious practice. This ecosystem plays a crucial role in the continuous internalization of pai values.

4. Key factors and practical recommendations

Multiple regression analysis identified three main predictors of curriculum transformation effectiveness: teachers' pedagogical competence ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), quality of religious moderation literacy modules ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$), and the intensity of inclusive islamic extracurricular programs ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$). Together, these variables explain 67.3% of the variance in rts score changes ($r^2 = 0.673$). These findings confirm that curriculum transformation is effective only when supported by adequate teacher capacity and a school ecosystem conducive to religious moderation (banks, 2008; muhaimin, 2012).

A school culture that emphasizes tolerance, togetherness, and non-violence serves as a foundational pillar in student character formation. A socially and religiously healthy environment strengthens the internalization of pai values beyond formal classroom learning. The use of digital literacy in pai learning helps students critically filter religious information, which is essential in countering extremist content widely disseminated through social media. Student participation in dialogical and inclusive religious extracurricular activities further strengthens balanced religious understanding and reduces tendencies toward intolerance.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that a systematically designed transformation of the islamic religious education (pai) curriculum, grounded in the values of religious moderation (*wasathiyyah*), is effective in significantly reducing students' tendencies toward radicalism at sma ar-rahman medan helvetia (a 31.7% decrease, $p < 0.001$). The three critical components of this transformation's success are: the contextual relevance of curriculum content, the competence of pai teachers in embodying moderate and dialogical pedagogies, and a school ecosystem that supports inclusivity.

Based on these findings, the study recommends: (1) the ministry of religious affairs and the ministry of education should integrate religious moderation literacy modules and digital literacy into the national pai curriculum; (2) pai teacher training programs should be strengthened through continuous modules on deradicalization and dialogical pedagogy; (3) islamic schools should develop extracurricular programs that promote intergroup interaction and multicultural experiences; (4) longitudinal studies are needed to examine the sustainability of students' attitudinal changes over time; and (5) partnerships between schools, parents, the national counterterrorism agency (bnpt), and local religious leaders should be established as a community-based resilience network against radicalism.

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