

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHERS' SENSE-MAKING IN IMPLEMENTING THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study examines how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers engage in sense-making when implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) in junior high schools. Using sense-making theory as the analytical lens, this qualitative case study was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Sukowono through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving PAI teachers and relevant school stakeholders. The data were analyzed interactively through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings identify a four-stage sense-making process: interpreting curriculum demands, contextualizing P5 themes through Islamic values and students' social realities, translating these interpretations into collaborative and reflective pedagogical practices, and evaluating students' understanding through authentic assessment. Rather than proposing an entirely new theoretical model, these stages provide an empirical adaptation and contextual elaboration of teacher sense-making theory within the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education settings. Theoretically, this study contributes to the discourse on sense-making theory and curriculum interpretation by showing that teacher sense-making in Islamic education is contextual, collaborative, and transformative rather than merely administrative. Practically, the findings underscore the need to strengthen teacher collaboration, contextual curriculum interpretation, and institutional pedagogical support for PAI teachers implementing P5.

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant shift in Indonesia's educational reform toward flexible, student-centered learning that emphasizes character development, contextual understanding, and 21st-century

competencies. One central component of this curriculum is *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5), which promotes interdisciplinary and project-based learning by connecting academic knowledge with students' lived experiences. In Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam* [PAI]), this reform creates both opportunities and challenges because teachers are expected not only to deliver religious content but also to relate Islamic values to local culture, social realities, and interdisciplinary learning experiences.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI should not be understood simply as compliance with curriculum documents or policy mandates. It requires teachers to interpret curriculum goals, negotiate competing expectations, and adjust pedagogical practices to diverse classroom realities. Previous studies have shown that teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, pedagogical readiness (Syofyan et al., 2024), and contextual adaptation significantly affect implementation success (Sianturi et al., 2025). However, these studies have largely emphasized teacher readiness, curriculum perceptions, or project-based learning outcomes, while paying limited attention to how teachers actively construct meaning when translating curriculum reform into classroom practice.

This interpretive dimension is particularly important in PAI because religious instruction extends beyond content delivery. PAI teachers are expected to connect Islamic teachings with contemporary social issues, students' lived experiences, and local cultural contexts while maintaining alignment with national educational goals. In P5 implementation, teachers must relate Islamic values to themes such as local wisdom, diversity, entrepreneurship, and health. This integration is not mechanical; it requires pedagogical interpretation and professional judgment regarding which religious values are relevant, how they should be contextualized, and how learning experiences can remain meaningful for students. Therefore, the central issue examined in this study is not merely curriculum implementation, but how PAI teachers make sense of curriculum reform in everyday pedagogical practice.

Sense-making theory provides a relevant analytical framework for explaining this process because it conceptualizes curriculum implementation as an interpretive and socially mediated process. Teachers do not passively adopt policy changes; instead, they interpret new ideas through prior beliefs, professional experiences, collaborative interactions, and contextual realities (Siu et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021). In curriculum

reform contexts, sense-making involves assimilation, accommodation, and negotiation, through which teachers align new curriculum expectations with existing pedagogical frameworks (Dolfing et al., 2021). Accordingly, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum should be understood as an ongoing process of curriculum interpretation rather than a linear transition from policy to practice. Guided by this framework, the present study analyses the cognitive and social processes through which Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers understand, reconstruct, and enact the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5). It argues that curriculum implementation is not an administrative act of complete compliance, but an active exercise of teacher agency shaped by identity and values. In this sense, PAI teachers do not merely execute state-mandated projects; they act as critical cultural translators who reinterpret policy directives by aligning national civic outcomes with local Islamic traditions and students' specific social realities.

Although research on teacher sense-making has expanded in the field of curriculum reform, existing literature has rarely examined how Islamic Religious Education teachers engage in sense-making when implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and P5. Prior studies have mainly investigated teacher sense-making in science, STEM, mathematics, or general curriculum contexts (Başar & Dilek, 2025; Dolfing et al., 2021; Siu et al., 2021). Meanwhile, emerging studies on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in Islamic and general education settings, can be synthesized into three major trends:

Trend 1: Teacher Preparedness and Structural/Administrative Challenges. A substantial body of research emphasizes the operational challenges faced by educators, including limited training, resource gaps, and initial difficulties in translating policy into basic teaching practices (Amalia et al., 2024; Syofyan et al., 2024). Scholars also note that inadequate infrastructure and administrative unreadiness complicate the initiation of co-curricular components, particularly the Pancasila Student Profile (P5), in schools (Astuti et al., 2024; Maylawati et al., 2025).

Trend 2: Methodological Applications and Project-Based Learning (PjBL). Another major strand of literature focuses on the pedagogical mechanisms of curriculum reform, especially how active and experiential learning models are used to improve student outcomes and critical thinking (Astutik et al., 2024; Pratami et al., 2024). These studies

highlight the use of project-based frameworks to support post-pandemic learning recovery and cultivate 21st-century skills (Marmoah et al., 2024; Tapung, 2025).

Trend 3: Philosophical Integration, Character Education, and Virtues. Recent literature also examines the alignment between national educational goals and school values, particularly how the curriculum incorporates the Pancasila Student Profile to foster critical thinking and character formation (Permatasari et al., 2025; Wardani et al., 2023). In Islamic educational contexts, this trend includes studies on the compatibility between national civic reforms and Islamic principles, enabling madrasahs to integrate national goals with holistic religious education.

Consequently, while existing literature tends to treat the curriculum as an administrative challenge (Trend 1), an instructional toolkit (Trend 2), or a philosophical text (Trend 3), limited attention has been paid to educators' internal and active interpretive processes. This is the distinct empirical gap addressed in this study. By employing sense-making theory, the study shifts attention away from administrative compliance or mechanical execution and instead examines the cognitive and social pathways through which PAI teachers negotiate, adapt, and transform state-mandated civic projects into contextualized and value-driven pedagogical practices.

This gap is especially significant because Islamic Religious Education occupies a distinctive pedagogical space in which teachers must simultaneously negotiate religious texts, local traditions, school culture, and students' social realities. Compared with teachers of general subjects, PAI teachers face additional interpretive challenges in determining how Islamic teachings can substantively contribute to interdisciplinary themes without reducing integration to symbolic religious insertion. In this study, the term integrated curriculum refers specifically to the contextual integration of PAI values into the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through P5 and interdisciplinary learning, rather than to a separate curriculum model independent of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Accordingly, this study analyses the sense-making processes and pedagogical practices of PAI teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and P5 at SMP Negeri 2 Sukowono. Theoretically, it extends sense-making theory into the context of Islamic Religious Education by showing how curriculum interpretation emerges through negotiations among religious values, local culture, and pedagogical realities. Empirically, it provides evidence of how teacher agency shapes contextual and transformative

curriculum implementation in PAI learning. In doing so, the study moves beyond discussions of teacher readiness and curriculum compliance toward a deeper understanding of how teachers actively construct curriculum meaning in practice.

METHODS

This qualitative case study explored how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers engage in sense-making when implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) at SMP Negeri 2 Sukowono. A qualitative approach was selected to capture teachers' interpretations in their natural setting, while the case study design enabled an in-depth examination of this bounded context (Debout, 2026; Merriam, 2009). Informants were chosen purposively based on their involvement in curriculum implementation. The primary participants were PAI teachers, whereas the principal, vice-principal for curriculum, cross-disciplinary teachers, and students served as supporting informants to provide multilayered perspectives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. The interviews explored teachers' understanding of the curriculum, their interpretation of P5 themes, value integration, and implementation challenges, while allowing participants to explain their meanings in depth (Lopez-Estrada & Elizondo-Mejias, 2024; Varoy et al., 2023). Classroom and project observations documented how teachers translated these interpretations into concrete pedagogical practices and collaborative interactions. In addition, lesson plans, project modules, and school curriculum documents were analysed to strengthen contextual understanding and support data triangulation.

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative model comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis focused on two main aspects: teachers' sense-making processes in relation to curriculum demands and the pedagogical practices used to translate these interpretations into contextual learning. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the study applied source and methodological triangulation by comparing data from different participants across interviews, observations, and documentary evidence (Fraser & Mays, 2019).

RESULTS

Teachers' Sense-Making in Interpreting the *Merdeka Curriculum* and P5

The findings show that Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam* [PAI]) teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Sukowono interpreted the *Merdeka Curriculum* and *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) not simply as administrative policy requirements, but as pedagogical opportunities to contextualize Islamic teachings within students' social realities. Teachers regarded P5 as a flexible space for integrating religious values with local culture, interdisciplinary knowledge, and contemporary issues relevant to students' daily lives.

Rather than viewing P5 as an additional burden detached from classroom instruction, teachers interpreted it as a framework that could make Islamic Religious Education more relevant, contextual, and experiential. They understood P5 themes as bridges connecting abstract Islamic values with concrete social practices familiar to students.

Interview data indicate that teachers generally began lesson planning by identifying the overarching P5 theme before exploring its connections with Islamic Religious Education content. For example, under the *Local Wisdom* theme, teachers integrated values such as respect for parents, gratitude, and appreciation of local culture into classroom discussions. Students were encouraged to analyse examples from their own community in Sukowono and reflect on these experiences through written assignments and visual projects (PAI Teacher Interview, January 12, 2026).

These findings indicate that teachers actively interpreted curriculum demands by identifying meaningful intersections between PAI content and P5 themes. Rather than implementing curriculum prescriptions mechanically, they exercised pedagogical judgment by selecting Islamic concepts that resonated with students' local contexts and lived experiences.

The findings further reveal that teachers consistently connected Islamic values to broader P5 themes. Within the *Local Wisdom* theme, concepts such as *syukur* (gratitude), *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation), and social solidarity were linked to community traditions practiced in Sukowono. Likewise, the *Global Diversity* theme was interpreted through the Islamic concept of *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), emphasizing respect for differences, tolerance, harmonious coexistence, and social cohesion. Interview participants explained that this approach helped students understand that diversity is compatible with Islamic

teachings rather than being in opposition to them (PAI Teacher Interview, January 15, 2026).

Teachers also interpreted P5 as a means of addressing contemporary social issues from Islamic ethical perspectives. Classroom discussions on misinformation and hoaxes, for example, were connected to Islamic teachings on truthful and responsible communication (*qawl al-sadid*), civic responsibility, and digital literacy. According to interview data, teachers encouraged students to evaluate misinformation using Islamic moral principles while simultaneously relating these values to civic education and responsible digital citizenship. This approach enabled students to recognize the practical relevance of Islamic values in responding to everyday social challenges (Teacher Interview, January 15, 2026).

Overall, these findings show that teachers did not approach curriculum reform as a rigid mandate. Instead, they treated it as a dynamic opportunity to integrate Islamic teachings with local realities and students' lived experiences. This interpretation enabled teachers to shift Islamic Religious Education (IRE) from the transmission of normative knowledge toward contextual and transformative learning practices, as summarized in the following table.

P5 Theme	Related PAI Content	Interdisciplinary Integration	Learning Activities	Summary of Teachers' Interpretation
Local Wisdom	Ethics (gratitude, respect)	Social Studies, Javanese Language, Arts	Community observation, discussion, poster creation	Teachers interpreted local traditions as authentic contexts for internalizing Islamic values of gratitude, mutual assistance, and social harmony.
Nurture the Mind and Body	<i>Thaharah</i> , healthy living	Science, Physical Education	Wudhu simulation, health discussion, lifestyle planning	Teachers integrated religious purification with scientific concepts of hygiene, enabling students to understand <i>thaharah</i> from both theological and health perspectives.
Global Diversity	<i>Ukhuwah</i> , tolerance	Civics, Social Studies, Indonesian Language	Case studies, presentations, classroom discussions	Teachers interpreted <i>ukhuwah</i> as a foundation for respecting diversity and promoting peaceful coexistence within multicultural society.
Entrepreneurship	<i>Muamalah</i> , honesty, trustworthiness	Economics, Mathematics, Crafts	Business simulation, profit calculation, ethical reflection	Teachers integrated Islamic business ethics with entrepreneurship education, emphasizing honesty, fairness, and

				social responsibility in economic activities.
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Table 1. Teachers' Sense-Making in Integrating Islamic Religious Education with P5 Themes

Contextual and Collaborative Pedagogical Practices

The findings indicate that teachers translated their interpretation of the Merdeka Curriculum into contextual and collaborative pedagogical practices that embedded Islamic values within interdisciplinary themes and students' everyday experiences. These practices emphasized contextualization, collaborative learning, project-based activities, value-oriented discussions, and authentic reflection.

Within the P5 theme of *Local Wisdom*, teachers incorporated local traditions such as *Slametan* and *Sambatan* into classroom instruction and project-based learning. Rather than presenting these traditions merely as cultural rituals, they positioned them as pedagogical resources for exploring Islamic values, including gratitude (*syukur*), mutual assistance (*ta'awun*), social solidarity, and communal harmony. Interview data indicate that students were encouraged to investigate cultural practices in their communities through observation, interviews with community leaders, and reflective activities that identified the Islamic values embedded within these traditions (PAI Teacher Interview, January 12, 2026). Classroom observations further revealed that collaboration with teachers of Social Studies, Javanese Language, and Cultural Arts enriched students' understanding by incorporating historical, linguistic, and sociocultural perspectives into the learning process.

The integration of Islamic teachings with scientific knowledge was also evident in lessons on *thaharah* (purification). Teachers connected the practices of *wudhu* and personal hygiene with discussions on health, disease prevention, and bodily cleanliness, enabling students to understand *thaharah* not only as a religious obligation but also as a practice that promotes healthy living. Interview findings suggest that teachers consistently emphasized the compatibility between Islamic teachings and scientific knowledge, helping students recognize that preventive health behaviors encouraged in Islam are also supported by scientific principles (PAI Teacher Interview, January 12, 2026). This interdisciplinary approach was further strengthened through collaboration with science teachers, who complemented religious explanations with scientific perspectives on hygiene and health.

A similar pattern emerged within the P5 theme of *Global Diversity*, where teachers linked the Islamic concept of *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) with tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and respect for social diversity. Learning activities included case analyses, classroom discussions, debates, and reflective assignments that encouraged students to examine real-life situations involving cultural and religious differences from Islamic ethical perspectives. According to interview data, teachers emphasized that *ukhuwah* extends beyond relationships among Muslims and encompasses respect for diversity and the maintenance of harmonious social relationships, thereby helping students understand that pluralism is compatible with Islamic teachings (PAI Teacher Interview, January 15, 2026).

The interdisciplinary integration also extended to entrepreneurship education through the incorporation of Islamic principles of *muamalah*. Entrepreneurship projects were designed to introduce students to concepts such as honesty (*amanah*), fairness, ethical responsibility, and justice in economic transactions. During buying-and-selling simulations, students not only practiced entrepreneurial skills but also reflected on Islamic business ethics, enabling them to understand that commercial activities involve moral responsibility in addition to economic objectives. Interview findings indicate that teachers consistently framed entrepreneurship as an ethical endeavor grounded in Islamic values rather than merely a means of generating profit (PAI Teacher Interview, January 15, 2026).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that collaborative pedagogical practices enabled students to experience Islamic Religious Education in practical, contextual, and meaningful ways. By integrating Islamic teachings with local culture, scientific knowledge, social diversity, and entrepreneurship, teachers transformed religious learning into an interdisciplinary educational process that strengthened students' understanding of Islamic values while enhancing their ability to apply those values in everyday social life.

Teacher Agency in Negotiating Institutional Constraints

The findings reveal that teachers exercised strong professional agency in negotiating institutional constraints during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and P5. They acted not only as curriculum implementers but also as

curriculum interpreters who actively adapted learning practices despite various structural limitations.

One of the principal enabling factors was teachers' strong professional commitment to making Islamic Religious Education more meaningful, engaging, and relevant to students' lives. Interview data indicate that teachers consistently sought to improve their pedagogical competence by participating in online seminars, engaging in professional learning communities, and exchanging ideas with fellow educators to enrich their instructional practices (PAI Teacher Interview, January 15, 2026).

Despite this commitment, teachers encountered several institutional constraints that affected curriculum implementation. The most frequently reported challenge was the limited time available for interdisciplinary planning and collaboration. Participants explained that scheduling constraints often reduced opportunities for collaborative curriculum design, making the planning process less comprehensive than intended (PAI Teacher Interview, January 15, 2026).

The findings also reveal disparities in teachers' understanding of curriculum integration. While some teachers viewed integration as a collaborative process of designing interdisciplinary learning experiences from the outset, others still perceived it as merely incorporating Qur'anic verses or Islamic concepts into existing subject matter. This difference in pedagogical understanding created inconsistencies in the implementation of integrated learning across classrooms (PAI Teacher Interview, January 15, 2026).

Another challenge concerned the limited availability of contextual teaching materials that integrated Islamic Religious Education with local culture and interdisciplinary themes. As a result, teachers frequently developed instructional resources independently or adapted materials from various sources to meet students' learning needs and local contexts.

Despite these challenges, institutional support and a collaborative school culture emerged as important enabling factors. Interview data indicate that school leadership encouraged interdisciplinary collaboration by providing opportunities for joint lesson planning and supporting teachers' participation in professional development activities. The principal also facilitated coordination among school leaders to allocate time for collaborative P5 planning and encouraged teachers to identify and propose relevant

training opportunities to strengthen their pedagogical capacity (Principal Interview, January 14, 2026).

Overall, these findings indicate that teacher agency emerged through continuous negotiation among professional commitment, institutional support, and practical constraints. Rather than functioning as passive recipients of curriculum policy, teachers actively interpreted, adapted, and refined curriculum implementation in response to the realities of their school context, thereby sustaining meaningful and contextually relevant Islamic Religious Education.

Four-Stage Sense-Making Process

The study identified a four-stage sense-making process through which PAI teachers interpreted and implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5). This process illustrates how teachers transformed curriculum policy into meaningful classroom practices through successive stages of interpretation, contextualization, pedagogical translation, and reflective evaluation.

The first stage involved curriculum interpretation, during which teachers examined P5 themes and curriculum expectations to identify meaningful intersections between Islamic Religious Education content and interdisciplinary project themes. Interview data indicate that teachers initially experienced difficulties in aligning topics such as morality (*akhlak*) and *fiqh* with contextual themes, including entrepreneurship and diversity. Through collaborative planning and professional reflection, however, they gradually developed pedagogical strategies that connected Islamic concepts with broader curriculum objectives (PAI Teacher Interview, January 12, 2026).

The second stage consisted of the contextualization of Islamic values. After interpreting curriculum requirements, teachers adapted Islamic teachings to students' local environments, lived experiences, and contemporary social issues. This process included relating local traditions such as *Slametan* and *Sambatan* to the values of gratitude (*syukur*) and mutual assistance (*ta'awun*), connecting *thaharah* with health and hygiene, and interpreting *ukhuwah* within the context of diversity and social harmony. Interview findings suggest that teachers deliberately grounded P5 themes in students' everyday realities to make Islamic values more accessible, relevant, and meaningful (PAI Teacher Interview).

The third stage involved pedagogical translation, in which teachers transformed their curriculum interpretations into concrete learning activities. These included collaborative projects, interdisciplinary assignments, value-based discussions, classroom presentations, and reflective writing tasks. The findings indicate that meaningful curriculum integration occurred when students actively combined Islamic values with knowledge and perspectives from other disciplines through project-based learning and collaborative inquiry (PAI Teacher Interview, January 15, 2026).

The final stage comprised reflective evaluation, where teachers assessed students' understanding through authentic assessment strategies such as portfolios, classroom observations, presentations, and reflective journals. Interview data reveal that reflective writing was frequently used to encourage students to evaluate how Islamic values could be applied in their daily lives, enabling assessment to focus not only on cognitive achievement but also on personal reflection and character development (PAI Teacher Interview, January 15, 2026).

Overall, the findings indicate that teachers' interpretation of the Merdeka Curriculum followed an iterative sense-making process encompassing curriculum interpretation, contextualization, pedagogical translation, and reflective evaluation. Rather than implementing curriculum policy in a linear manner, teachers continuously interpreted, adapted, enacted, and reflected upon curriculum practices in response to students' needs and local contexts. This dynamic process enabled Islamic Religious Education to become more contextual, collaborative, and transformative, as summarized in the following table.

Stage	Description	Empirical Example
Interpretation	Teachers interpret curriculum demands.	P5 is understood as value integration.
Contextualization	Teachers relate P5 themes to local and Islamic realities.	Slametan and thaharah.
Pedagogical Translation	Teachers design concrete learning activities.	Projects, discussions, and reflection.
Reflective Evaluation	Teachers assess students' meaning-making.	Reflection journals and presentations.

Table 2. Four Stages of the Sense-Making Process

DISCUSSION

Teacher Sense-Making as Curriculum Interpretation

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is fundamentally an interpretive process rather than a purely technical or administrative

task. Teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Sukowono did not simply carry out curriculum mandates as stated in policy documents; instead, they interpreted curriculum expectations through their professional beliefs, pedagogical experiences, and understanding of students' social realities. This finding reinforces the argument that curriculum implementation depends significantly on how teachers construct meaning from educational reform (Başar & Dilek, 2025; Wen et al., 2021).

In this study, teachers' sense-making was evident in their ability to treat P5 themes as pedagogical spaces for contextualizing Islamic values. Rather than viewing P5 as an additional requirement detached from classroom instruction, teachers reconstructed its meaning in line with the aims of Islamic education. This process shows that curriculum interpretation is neither fixed nor linear, but dynamic and contextually negotiated. Teachers selectively identified intersections between curriculum themes and Islamic teachings to make learning more meaningful for students.

This finding supports sense-making theory, which views teachers as active interpreters of policy rather than passive implementers (Siu et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021). Teachers' interpretation of curriculum reform was shaped not only by policy texts but also by prior pedagogical beliefs about the role of religion in students' daily lives. Accordingly, teachers positioned Islamic values as ethical foundations for understanding broader social issues, including diversity, health, and entrepreneurship.

The findings also suggest that teachers' sense-making involved processes of assimilation and accommodation, as discussed in curriculum innovation studies (Dolfing et al., 2021). Assimilation occurred when teachers integrated new curriculum demands, particularly P5 themes, into their existing understanding of PAI instruction. They continued to teach religious values but repositioned them within interdisciplinary and contextual learning activities. Accommodation emerged when teachers modified their pedagogical approaches by moving from predominantly doctrinal instruction toward collaborative, project-based, and reflective learning.

For example, the theme of Global Diversity was no longer interpreted solely as civic education content; it also became a platform for discussing *ukhuwah* as a moral foundation for multicultural coexistence. Likewise, *thaharah* was no longer limited to ritual obligation, but was reinterpreted through the perspectives of health and hygiene. Such reinterpretation shows that teachers do not merely align curriculum with subject content; they reconstruct curriculum meaning to ensure pedagogical relevance.

These findings also affirm van der Merwe's argument (2014) that curriculum implementation is shaped by how teachers correlate prescribed curricula with classroom realities. At SMP Negeri 2 Sukowono, curriculum flexibility did not automatically produce meaningful learning. Meaningful implementation emerged because teachers actively interpreted policy and translated it into pedagogical experiences relevant to students' local and religious contexts.

Thus, teacher sense-making in this study can be understood as a hermeneutic process of curriculum interpretation in which teachers negotiate curriculum demands through religious knowledge, local realities, and students lived experiences. While previous studies have generally conceptualized teacher sense-making as the interpretation of educational policy through professional beliefs and organizational contexts (Siu et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021), this study extends that perspective by showing that, within Islamic Religious Education, curriculum interpretation also entails negotiating religious epistemology and culturally embedded values. Curriculum reform therefore gains practical meaning not only through teachers' cognitive interpretation of policy, but also through their continuous mediation among national curriculum goals, Islamic teachings, and local sociocultural realities.

Sense-Making in the Context of Islamic Religious Education

The findings indicate that teacher sense-making in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has distinctive characteristics compared with other disciplines because curriculum interpretation occurs at the intersection of religious authority, local culture, and national educational reform. Unlike subjects that primarily focus on disciplinary knowledge, PAI requires teachers to negotiate multiple layers of meaning involving revelation, ethical values, local traditions, and students' sociocultural realities.

One important finding concerns how teachers interpreted local traditions such as *Slametan* and *Sambatan*. Rather than treating these traditions as cultural practices external to religion, teachers framed them as pedagogical spaces through which Islamic values could be explained contextually. Through discussions of gratitude (*syukur*), solidarity (*ukhuwah*), and mutual assistance (*ta'awun*), teachers helped students understand that religion and local culture can reinforce one another rather than stand in opposition.

This finding contributes to the growing discourse on Islamic education reform, which argues that contemporary Islamic learning must move beyond normative transmission toward contextual engagement with social realities (Amalia et al., 2024). The integration of *Slametan* and *Sambatan* illustrates how teachers negotiated religious interpretation while remaining responsive to local wisdom. Consequently, Islamic learning became more culturally embedded and socially meaningful.

Similarly, the integration of *thaharah* with scientific understandings of hygiene reflects how teachers constructed interdisciplinary meanings from religious content. Instead of positioning ritual purification exclusively within worship, teachers linked it to preventive health and healthy lifestyles. This interdisciplinary approach suggests that sense-making in PAI is inherently dialogical because teachers must mediate between religious epistemology and scientific knowledge.

The discussion of *ukhuwah* within the Global Diversity theme further demonstrates the contextual nature of teacher sense-making. Teachers interpreted Islamic brotherhood not narrowly as intra-religious solidarity, but more broadly as respect for humanity and diversity. This reinterpretation is particularly relevant in multicultural educational settings, where religious education may become exclusive if it is disconnected from civic values.

Likewise, entrepreneurship learning linked with *muamalah* shows that PAI teachers interpret economic activities not merely as technical competencies, but as ethical practices grounded in Islamic teachings. By emphasizing honesty (*amanah*), fairness, contracts, and social responsibility, teachers transformed entrepreneurship into a moral learning experience.

Taken together, these findings suggest that teacher sense-making in PAI is contextual, relational, and transformative. It is contextual because teachers interpret curriculum through local realities; relational because interpretation emerges through interactions among religion, culture, and interdisciplinary knowledge; and transformative because it shifts Islamic learning from doctrinal transmission toward reflective and socially embedded pedagogy.

This study therefore extends the existing literature on teacher sense-making and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by demonstrating that curriculum interpretation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) involves continuous negotiation among religious teachings, local cultural traditions, and contemporary educational

demands. Previous studies on teacher sense-making have established that teachers interpret educational policies through professional beliefs, pedagogical experiences, and organizational contexts rather than implementing them mechanically (Siu et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021). Similarly, research on the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes that successful implementation depends on teachers' readiness, curriculum adaptation, student-centered pedagogy, and the integration of local contexts into learning. Teachers are therefore viewed as key agents who translate curriculum flexibility into contextual instructional practices while navigating challenges related to professional competence, resources, and institutional support (Amalia et al., 2024; Hartati et al., 2024; Sianturi et al., 2025; Syofyan et al., 2024).

The present findings both confirm and extend this body of research. Consistent with earlier studies, PAI teachers actively adapted the Merdeka Curriculum to students' needs and local contexts. However, this study shows that curriculum adaptation in Islamic Religious Education entails a more complex interpretive process than has generally been reported in previous Merdeka Curriculum studies. Rather than merely contextualizing instructional materials or applying project-based learning, teachers continuously negotiated multiple sources of meaning, including Islamic teachings, local cultural practices such as *Slametan* and *Sambatan*, the values embedded in *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5), and students' lived experiences. Curriculum interpretation thus becomes not only a pedagogical or organizational activity, but also a process of religious, cultural, and epistemological mediation.

Teacher Agency and Contextual Curriculum Reform

The findings further demonstrate that teacher agency played a crucial role in shaping how the Merdeka Curriculum was interpreted and implemented in school practice. Teachers did not respond to curriculum reform passively; instead, they exercised agency through adaptation, improvisation, and collaborative problem-solving despite institutional constraints.

Consistent with ecological perspectives on teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2022), the study shows that agency emerged not as an individual trait but as an outcome of interactions among teachers, school leadership, collegial collaboration, and structural conditions. Teachers' professional commitment to making Islamic learning more relevant motivated them to seek creative solutions even when institutional support was limited.

School leadership functioned as an enabling condition for teacher agency. Support from the principal in facilitating collaborative planning and encouraging professional development created opportunities for teachers to experiment with contextual and interdisciplinary learning. This finding aligns with Habibi et al. (2025), who argue that supportive instructional leadership strengthens teachers' professional efficacy and willingness to innovate.

Teacher collaboration also functioned as an important form of professional social capital. The integration of PAI with Social Studies, Science, Arts, Civics, and Mathematics indicates that curriculum reform becomes more meaningful when teachers engage in collective interpretation. Such collaboration strengthened pedagogical coherence and expanded students' learning experiences beyond disciplinary boundaries.

However, teacher agency also developed under significant constraints. Limited time, administrative burdens, and insufficient integrative learning resources often hindered deeper curriculum integration. Teachers reported that interdisciplinary planning required sustained discussion, competency mapping, and assessment design, all of which were difficult to accomplish within limited planning schedules.

These findings support the view that curriculum reform without adequate structural support often leads to fragmented or superficial implementation (Tao & Weng, 2026; Yakavets et al., 2023). However, unlike studies that primarily emphasize implementation failure, this research shows that constraints may also stimulate agency. Teachers responded to limitations by seeking resources independently through professional communities, online training, and collegial discussions.

Importantly, the study reveals interpretive ambiguity among teachers regarding curriculum integration. Some teachers still understood integration symbolically, namely as the insertion of religious examples into subject matter, whereas PAI teachers interpreted integration substantively through interdisciplinary design and contextual meaning-making. This discrepancy suggests that curriculum reform depends not only on policy flexibility but also on shared interpretive understanding among teachers.

Consistent with previous studies, this research confirms that teacher agency is fundamental to the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Earlier studies have shown that teachers play a central role in adapting the curriculum to local contexts (Sianturi et al., 2025; Syofyan et al., 2024), balancing curricular autonomy with innovative pedagogical practices (Hartati et al., 2024), and exercising agency through

professional collaboration and supportive school leadership (Habibi et al., 2025; Hastomo et al., 2025). These findings reinforce the view that teacher agency is shaped by interactions between individual capacities and contextual conditions rather than by individual autonomy alone.

This study extends previous research by demonstrating that, in Islamic Religious Education (PAI), teacher agency is enacted as curriculum negotiation rather than merely curriculum adaptation. Unlike earlier studies that primarily emphasize teachers' readiness, autonomy, or professional competence in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, the present findings reveal that PAI teachers continuously negotiated pedagogical decisions among Islamic values, local cultural contexts, students' needs, and institutional constraints. Teacher agency should therefore be understood as a contextual and relational practice through which curriculum reform is translated into meaningful and culturally responsive classroom practice, thereby broadening current understandings of teacher agency in Merdeka Curriculum implementation.

Theoretical Contribution and Novelty of the Study

This study contributes to the literature on teacher sense-making and Merdeka Curriculum implementation in several important ways.

First, unlike previous studies that predominantly examine teacher readiness, policy implementation, or curriculum adaptation in general terms, this study specifically investigates how PAI teachers construct meaning when interpreting and implementing P5 within Islamic Religious Education settings. The findings demonstrate that teachers do not simply adopt curriculum themes; they actively negotiate meaning among Islamic teachings, local culture, and students' social realities. In this respect, curriculum implementation becomes a hermeneutic and pedagogical process rather than a technical act of compliance.

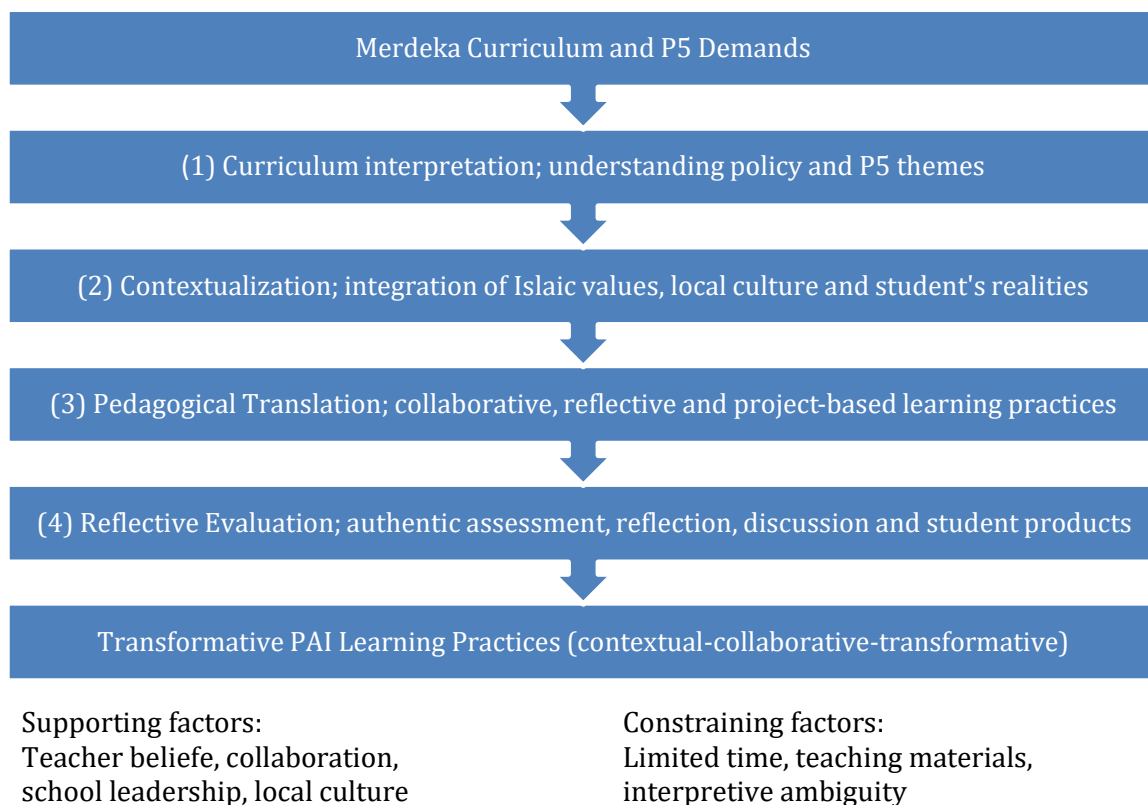
Second, this study extends sense-making theory by proposing a four-stage empirical model of teacher sense-making in the context of Islamic Religious Education and the Merdeka Curriculum. Rather than constituting an entirely new theoretical framework, the model functions as a contextual elaboration of teacher sense-making processes identified in curriculum reform literature.

The four-stage process includes: 1) Curriculum Interpretation - teachers interpret the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum and identify intersections with Islamic Religious

Education; 2) Contextualization of Values - teachers relate Islamic teachings to local culture, students' experiences, and P5 themes; 3) Pedagogical Translation - teachers transform their interpretations into collaborative, project-based, and reflective learning activities; 4) Reflective Evaluation - teachers assess students' understanding through authentic and reflective assessment practices. This process suggests that teacher sense-making in Islamic education is iterative rather than linear because it involves continuous reinterpretation and contextual adjustment.

Third, the study demonstrates that curriculum reform in Islamic education is shaped by teacher agency operating within an educational ecology. Curriculum flexibility alone does not guarantee meaningful implementation; rather, success depends on teachers' ability to negotiate institutional constraints, collaborate professionally, and reinterpret policy in relation to students' realities.

To clarify the originality of this study, the findings are summarized in the following framework:



Overall, this study extends rather than merely confirms existing research on teacher sense-making and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Previous studies have primarily conceptualized teacher sense-making as teachers' interpretation of educational policy through professional beliefs and organizational contexts (Siu et al.,

2021; Wen et al., 2021), while research on the Merdeka Curriculum has largely emphasized teacher readiness, curriculum adaptation, pedagogical innovation, and local contextualization (Hartati et al., 2024; Hastomo et al., 2025; Sianturi et al., 2025; Syofyan et al., 2024). Although these studies acknowledge teachers as key agents of curriculum implementation, they offer limited explanation of how teachers construct meaning when multiple epistemological and cultural demands intersect.

The present study addresses this gap by demonstrating that teacher sense-making in Islamic Religious Education under the Merdeka Curriculum is not merely an individual cognitive process, but a contextual, collaborative, and transformative practice of curriculum interpretation. Specifically, it shows that PAI teachers continuously negotiated Islamic teachings, local cultural wisdom, the Pancasila Student Profile (P5), and students' lived experiences in translating curriculum policy into classroom practice. This finding broadens the explanatory scope of teacher sense-making theory and contributes to Merdeka Curriculum literature by revealing the interpretive mechanisms through which curriculum reform is enacted in faith-based educational settings

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers engage in sense-making when implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) at SMP Negeri 2 Sukowono. The major findings reveal that teacher sense-making operates through a four-stage process comprising curriculum interpretation, contextualization of Islamic values and local realities, pedagogical translation into collaborative and reflective learning, and reflective evaluation through authentic assessment. As a reinforcing and explanatory outcome, the study shows that, through this structured cognitive process, teachers exercised agency to transform PAI learning from traditional and normative religious instruction into contextual, interdisciplinary, and socially meaningful educational practice that bridges state directives with students' local realities.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by extending sense-making theory into the context of Islamic Religious Education. It demonstrates that curriculum interpretation in PAI is inherently contextual, collaborative, and shaped by negotiations among religious values, local culture, and curriculum reform demands. It also offers an empirical four-stage sense-making model that explains how teachers operationalize

these reforms. However, because the study was limited to a single school context, the findings should be interpreted cautiously and are not directly generalizable to other educational settings. Future research should therefore employ multi-site or longitudinal designs to examine how teacher sense-making develops across diverse school environments. Practically, the findings suggest that schools and policymakers should provide more structured opportunities for interdisciplinary planning, targeted professional development, stronger school leadership support, and locally relevant integrative teaching resources to foster meaningful pedagogical innovation.

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