

## ANALYSIS OF THE NEEDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF PAI STUDENTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE BASED ON THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM

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### Abstract

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in the digital era faces serious challenges due to fundamental shifts in the characteristics and learning needs of students who are increasingly immersed in digital ecosystems. This study aims to analyze the characteristics and learning needs of PAI students in the digital era as a basis for developing Merdeka Curriculum-based learning designs. A qualitative approach was employed using library research method through content analysis of relevant scientific literature. The findings reveal that PAI students in the digital era are characterized as *digital natives* with visual and interactive learning preferences; they require contextual content, varied digital media, active-collaborative methods, and differentiated approaches. The learning environment is marked by opportunities such as expanded access and gamification, while simultaneously threatened by digital distraction and unverified religious content. Based on these findings, a responsive PAI learning design under the Merdeka Curriculum can be constructed upon five core principles: differentiated learning, pedagogical technology integration, Pancasila Student Profile reinforcement, Islamic *project-based learning*, and authentic digital assessment.

**Keywords:** Needs Analysis, Student Characteristics, Islamic Religious Education, Digital Era, Merdeka Curriculum

### Abstrak

Pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) di era digital menghadapi tantangan serius akibat perubahan karakteristik dan kebutuhan belajar peserta didik yang kian terjalin erat dengan ekosistem digital. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis karakteristik dan kebutuhan belajar peserta didik PAI di era digital sebagai dasar pengembangan desain pembelajaran berbasis Kurikulum Merdeka. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kepustakaan melalui analisis isi terhadap sumber-sumber ilmiah yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa peserta didik PAI era digital memiliki karakteristik sebagai *digital natives* dengan preferensi belajar visual dan interaktif; memiliki kebutuhan konten yang kontekstual, media digital yang variatif, metode aktif-kolaboratif, dan pendekatan diferensiatif; dilingkupi peluang berupa perluasan akses dan gamifikasi, sekaligus ancaman berupa distraksi digital dan konten keagamaan yang menyimpang. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, desain pembelajaran PAI berbasis Kurikulum Merdeka yang responsif dapat dibangun di atas lima prinsip utama: diferensiasi pembelajaran, integrasi teknologi pedagogis,

*penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila, project-based learning Islami, dan asesmen autentik digital.*

**Kata Kunci:** Analisis Kebutuhan, Karakteristik Peserta Didik, PAI, Era Digital, Kurikulum Merdeka

## INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) occupies a very strategic position in Indonesia's national education system. As a subject that not only transfers religious knowledge but also serves as a vehicle for character building, noble morals, and religious identity for students, IRE has responsibilities that go far beyond the cognitive dimension alone. However, amid the increasingly massive and unstoppable wave of digital disruption, PAI learning faces existential challenges that question its relevance and effectiveness for a generation born and raised in a digital ecosystem. Nata states that Islamic education in the contemporary era must be able to respond actively and critically to major changes occurring in society, including those brought about by the digital technology revolution, so that PAI does not lose its influence on the formation of students' personalities (Nata, 2021). This reality is even more urgent when data shows that the average Indonesian teenager spends more than five hours a day on digital platforms, which indirectly makes the digital ecosystem a much more dominant space for religious socialization than formal classrooms.

The students who are the main subjects of PAI learning today are Generation Z and Generation Alpha, who have never known a world without the internet, social media, and smart devices. Prensky refers to them as *digital natives*, a generation that thinks and processes information in a fundamentally different way from previous generations because they have been exposed to digital technology from a very early age (Prensky, 2001). The unique characteristics of this generation demand a fundamental paradigm shift in PAI learning: from a transmissive and teacher-centered approach to a transformative, interactive, and learner-centered approach. Abdurrahmansyah emphasizes that the development of an authentic PAI curriculum must always start from a deep understanding of the reality of the students, the socio-cultural context, and the holistic goals of Islamic education so that the resulting learning design is truly relevant and impactful (Abdurrahmansyah, 2021). Hamalik reinforced that a curriculum that is unable to adapt to changes in student characteristics and the demands of the times will lose its relevance and ultimately fail to achieve the expected educational goals (Hamalik, 2018).

Various previous studies have examined themes related to PAI learning and digital technology, but with a partial focus and scope, leaving a significant research gap. Faiqoh and Kurniawan prove that technology integration increases motivation to learn PAI, but the study does not use an analysis of student needs as the basis for its design (Faiqoh & Kurniawan, 2021). Wahid and Muiz revealed the low level of religious digital literacy among students, but did not continue to the level of concrete learning design development (Wahid & Muiz, 2021). Masitoh and Bachri examined the urgency of Islamic value-based digital literacy conceptually and theoretically without touching on specific curricular

implementation dimensions (Masitoh & Bachri, 2020). Aji researched the effectiveness of online PAI learning during the pandemic, but his study was situational and did not integrate the Merdeka Curriculum framework as its design foundation (Aji, 2020). From this mapping, a gap that has not been answered is clear: there has been no comprehensive study that integrates the analysis of the needs and characteristics of PAI students in the digital era as the foundation for developing Merdeka Curriculum-based learning designs. This is the novelty or innovation that is the main contribution of this study, namely a study that moves from data on the characteristics and needs of students to the formulation of a concrete, structured PAI learning design that is in line with the Merdeka Curriculum policy.

Based on the background and mapping of the research gap described above, this study aims to answer four main questions in a comprehensive and integrated manner. First, what are the characteristics of PAI students in the digital era, particularly in terms of learning styles, technological habits, and their implications for the learning process? Second, what are the real needs of PAI students in the digital ecosystem in terms of content, media, methods, and learning approaches? Third, what are the dynamics of opportunities and challenges surrounding PAI learning in the era of digital disruption? Fourth, how can a Merdeka Curriculum-based PAI learning design that is responsive to the characteristics and needs of digital students be formulated concretely? These four objectives are designed synergistically, where the answers to the first and second objectives form the foundation for the third objective, and all of them lead to the fourth objective as the final product of the research in the form of recommendations for PAI learning design that is data-based, rooted in Islamic values, and in line with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum (Mulyasa, 2021).

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review (library research). The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand, interpret, and construct in-depth meaning from the phenomenon of PAI learning in the digital era, which is complex and contextual. Sugiyono states that qualitative research is based on postpositivism philosophy and emphasizes meaning rather than generalization (Sugiyono, 2021). A literature study was chosen because the research questions asked were conceptual-analytical in nature and could be answered comprehensively through a critical review of relevant scientific literature. The research data sources were divided into two categories: primary sources in the form of academic books by Islamic education experts such as Abdurrahmansyah, Muhaimin, Mulyasa, Nata, Majid, Sanjaya, Hamalik, Rusman, Zubaedi, Daryanto and Karim, as well as Suyanto and Jihad, plus reputable scientific journal articles and official policy documents on the Merdeka PAI Curriculum from the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs; and secondary sources in the form of supporting literature that provides additional analytical context. Zed states that the quality of a literature study is largely determined by the researcher's ability to identify and analyze the most relevant, authoritative, and up-to-date sources in accordance with the

issues being studied (Zed, 2014). Data collection was carried out through documentation techniques and systematic literature review in three stages: identification of sources through the Google Scholar, SINTA, and ERIC databases; selection of sources based on criteria of relevance, publisher reputation, and recency; and systematic recording and organization of data. Data analysis used content analysis techniques combined with critical-interpretive analysis. Krippendorff states that content analysis is a technique used to make valid inferences from texts in the context of their use (Krippendorff, 2018). The analysis process was carried out through four interactive steps following the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, namely: data reduction, data display, interpretation and synthesis, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Data validity is ensured through source triangulation, which is confirming each finding with more than one independent and authoritative source, as well as confirmability through documentation transparency and consistency in applying analysis criteria throughout the research process. Moleong states that triangulation is a data validity checking technique that utilizes something outside the data for checking or as a comparison (Moleong, 2017).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Characteristics of Students in the Digital Age and Their Implications for Islamic Education**

The rapid development of digital technology in recent decades has brought significant changes to various aspects of human life, including education. Students who grow and develop in the digital age have different characteristics compared to previous generations. They are often referred to as Generation Z or even Generation Alpha, a generation that has interacted with various digital devices such as the internet, social media, and modern communication technology since birth. These differences in characteristics certainly have major implications for how they learn, interact with information, and understand various learning materials, including in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning.

Marc Prensky refers to this generation as digital natives, a generation that is naturally accustomed to using technological language because they have been exposed to various digital devices such as computers, video games, the internet, and smartphones since childhood. This condition gives them a different way of thinking, learning style, and habit of interacting with information compared to previous generations, who are referred to as digital immigrants. These differences require adjustments in the learning process so that education remains relevant to the needs and characteristics of students in the digital age. One of the main characteristics of students in the digital age is their tendency toward visual and interactive learning styles. Various studies show that the digital generation finds it easier to understand abstract concepts when they are presented in visual forms such as animated videos, infographics, digital simulations, and other interactive media. This is in contrast to conventional learning methods that emphasize lectures or textual delivery of material. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, this characteristic is an important consideration because much of the PAI material is conceptual and

normative, such as the concepts of tauhid, akhlak, and fiqh, which have often been conveyed through verbal and textual approaches.

In addition, students in the digital era also have a tendency to multitask, which is the ability to perform several activities simultaneously. For example, they can study while opening social media, listening to music, or communicating through instant messaging applications. Although this ability appears to be a form of adaptation to the digital environment, a number of studies show that excessive multitasking can actually reduce the ability to concentrate and the depth of understanding of learning materials. This phenomenon poses a challenge for Islamic education teachers who not only strive to convey religious knowledge but also instill spiritual and moral values that require a process of deep reflection. Another prominent characteristic of students in the digital age is the high intensity of social media use. Various surveys show that today's teenagers spend a considerable amount of time each day accessing various digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Social media not only serves as a means of entertainment but also as a source of information, including religious information. However, not all religious information circulating on social media can be verified as true. Much of the content is provocative, unverified, and even deviates from moderate Islamic teachings. Therefore, students need good digital literacy skills to be able to filter the information they obtain from the digital world. In terms of technological literacy, students in the digital age generally have fairly good technical skills in operating various digital devices.

They can quickly learn how to use new applications, explore various sources of information on the internet, and interact on various digital platforms. However, these technical skills are not always accompanied by the critical thinking skills needed to evaluate the information they find. Therefore, PAI learning in the digital age must not only adapt the learning media to the digital habits of students, but also be able to strengthen digital literacy based on Islamic values. These characteristics of students have direct implications for the PAI learning process. Teachers are required to be able to utilize digital technology as an effective and engaging learning medium. In addition, the learning design must be able to accommodate visual and interactive learning styles without reducing the depth of religious material. Learning also needs to integrate critical digital literacy so that students are able to understand, evaluate, and respond to the various religious information they encounter in the digital space.

In addition to these characteristics, students in the digital era also show a tendency to learn independently and flexibly. They are accustomed to accessing various information via the internet anytime and anywhere. This condition makes learning models that are too teacher-centered less relevant. Learning approaches that place students as active subjects in the learning process, such as student-centered learning, are considered more effective for the digital generation. This approach is also in line with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the importance of independent learning and the optimal development of students' potential.

## **Analysis of PAI Learning Needs in the Digital Age**

Learning needs analysis is a very important first step in developing effective learning designs. This analysis aims to identify the gap between the existing learning conditions and the ideal conditions expected. In the context of PAI learning in the digital era, needs analysis cannot be based solely on curriculum assumptions, but must depart from the reality of learners' lives, which are increasingly connected to the digital ecosystem. The results of the analysis show that there are several main dimensions of student needs in PAI learning in the digital age. The first dimension is the need for learning content that is contextual and relevant to their digital lives. So far, one of the weaknesses of PAI learning has been the delivery of material that tends to be doctrinal and less relevant to the realities of students' lives. In fact, much of students' lives today take place in the digital space. Therefore, PAI material needs to be able to address various ethical and moral issues that arise in the digital world, such as the ethics of communication on social media, the spread of hoaxes, digital privacy, and online transactions.

The second dimension is the need for interactive and digital technology-based learning media. Students tend to be more interested in learning media such as short videos, podcasts, infographics, and digital quizzes than conventional textbooks. Visual and audio-visual media have been proven to be more effective in increasing students' emotional engagement and understanding of learning materials. The third dimension is the need for active and collaborative learning methods. Students in the digital era tend to get bored with one-way lecture methods. They are more interested in learning that provides opportunities for discussion, problem solving, and collaboration with their friends. Methods such as project-based learning, case discussions, and moral decision-making simulations can be alternative PAI learning methods that are more relevant to the characteristics of students. The fourth dimension is the need for a personalized and differentiated learning approach. Students have different backgrounds, interests, and learning abilities. Therefore, PAI learning needs to provide space for learning differentiation so that each student can develop their potential optimally.

## **The Dynamics of PAI Learning in the Era of Digital Disruption**

The digital era not only presents opportunities but also various challenges for PAI learning. On the one hand, digital technology opens up very broad access to various religious learning resources. Students can access interpretations of the Qur'an, hadith studies, and lectures by scholars from around the world simply through their digital devices. In addition, various digital platforms such as Google Classroom, Quizizz, Kahoot, and other learning applications enable teachers to create a more interactive and enjoyable learning experience. Technology also enables cross-school and even cross-country learning collaboration. However, the digital era also presents serious challenges for PAI learning. One of the biggest challenges is the phenomenon of digital distraction, which is a loss of concentration caused by various digital distractions such as social

media, online games, and other entertainment content. Students can easily switch from learning activities to entertainment activities in a matter of seconds.

Another challenge is the proliferation of unverified or even radical religious content on the internet. Students who do not yet have a strong understanding of religion are very vulnerable to being influenced by various deviant religious narratives. Therefore, PAI learning needs to act as an ideological bulwark that equips students with critical religious literacy skills. In addition, the digital divide is still a reality in Indonesian education. Not all students have equal access to digital devices and adequate internet networks. This condition must be taken into consideration when designing technology-based learning so that it remains inclusive and fair.

### **Independent Curriculum-Based PAI Learning Design**

Based on an analysis of the characteristics and needs of students in the digital era, the development of PAI learning design needs to refer to the principles of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility, independent learning, and student-centered learning. The first principle is the application of differentiated learning that can accommodate the diverse needs of students. Teachers can provide various formats of learning materials such as text, video, and infographics to suit the different learning styles of students. The second principle is the pedagogical integration of digital technology. The use of technology should not be merely technical, but must consider the suitability of the technology, material, and learning strategies.

The third principle is the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly in the dimensions of faith, devotion to God Almighty, and noble character. Islamic values must be fully integrated into every learning activity. The fourth principle is the application of a project-based learning model that integrates Islamic values with the context of students' digital lives. For example, projects to create digital da'wah content, anti-hoax campaigns based on Islamic values, or exploring the history of Islamic civilization through digital sources. The fifth principle is the development of authentic assessments that are able to measure students' religious competence holistically. Assessment should not only focus on cognitive aspects, but also include attitudes and the practice of Islamic values in real life.

### **CONCLUSION**

The characteristics of students in the digital age show significant changes in the way they learn, interact with information, and understand learning materials. Characteristics such as a preference for visual media, multitasking habits, intense use of technology, and openness to digital information have major implications for Islamic Religious Education learning. A needs analysis shows that PAI learning in the digital age requires contextual content, interactive learning media, active and collaborative learning methods, and a differentiated learning approach. In addition, PAI learning must also be able to respond to various challenges arising from the development of digital technology. Therefore, the development of PAI learning designs based on the Merdeka Curriculum must be carried

out comprehensively by considering the characteristics of students, learning needs, and the dynamics of the digital environment. With the right learning design, Islamic religious education is expected to remain relevant, meaningful, and capable of shaping a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent but also has spiritual depth and strong character amid the ever-evolving tide of digitalization.

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