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EVALUATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION USING GOAL-FREE EVALUATION: AN ANALYSIS OF INSTRUCTIONAL AND NON-INSTRUCTIONAL IMPACTS ON STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
This study examines the implementation of the merdeka curriculum in Islamic education at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya within the context of Indonesia's ongoing educational reform. The research aims to evaluate both instructional and non-instructional impacts of the curriculum on students' holistic development. The study was conducted in response to limitations of previous evaluations that relied heavily on goal-oriented models and tended to overlook unintended learning outcomes, particularly in moral and spiritual domains. A qualitative evaluative approach employing a Goal-Free Evaluation (GFE) model was used to identify actual outcomes experienced by students without reference to predefined curriculum objectives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom and school-wide observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that the merdeka curriculum fosters increased learning engagement, deeper religious understanding, and enhanced ethical reasoning at the instructional level. Additionally, significant non-instructional impacts emerged, including character formation, spiritual awareness, discipline, and social competence, largely shaped by school culture, religious habituation, and co-curricular activities.
Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum; Islamic Education; Goal-Free Evaluation; Instructional and non-instructional impacts; Student development

INTRODUCTION

Educational reform in Indonesia through the implementation of the merdeka curriculum represents a systemic shift toward learner-centered, flexible, and competency-based education aimed at fostering holistic student development (Asrori & Saputro, 2025; Lubis, 2025). This curriculum emphasizes autonomy in learning, contextual pedagogy, and the integration of character education aligned with the *profil pelajar pancasila*. Within this reform agenda, Islamic education (PAI) occupies a strategic position, as it is expected not only to transmit religious knowledge but also to cultivate moral integrity, spiritual awareness, and social responsibility among learners (Siswanto et al., 2023; Astuti et al., 2024).

Empirical studies have reported that the merdeka curriculum has been increasingly implemented in Islamic education settings, including public schools, madrasahs, and faith-based private institutions. In Muhammadiyah schools, which integrate national curriculum frameworks with Islamic values, the merdeka curriculum offers both opportunities and challenges in balancing pedagogical innovation and religious identity. Prior research indicates that PAI teachers have begun to adopt more contextual, project-based, and student-centered approaches under this curriculum

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(Rohmawan & Fattah, 2024; Wafa et al., 2024; Amalia et al., 2025; Azizah et al., 2025). Nevertheless, these studies largely focus on implementation practices and curricular alignment, rather than systematically examining their educational impacts at the student level.

From an evaluation standpoint, most existing assessments rely on goal-oriented evaluation models, particularly the CIPP framework, which assess effectiveness based on predetermined objectives and indicators (Bandu et al., 2021; Nabilah & Suyanto, 2025). While such approaches are valuable for monitoring program fidelity, they tend to marginalize unintended and emergent outcomes that arise during curriculum implementation. This limitation is particularly critical in PAI, where learning outcomes often encompass moral behavior, spiritual disposition, and social engagement—dimensions that are not always explicitly articulated in formal curriculum goals.

Recent literature underscores the importance of non-instructional learning outcomes, including character development, discipline, social competence, and participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities, in shaping students' overall development (Al Ajmi & Al Adawi, 2023; Kanar & Heinrich, 2024; Mekuria et al., 2024; Okumu, 2025). In Islamic education contexts, these outcomes align closely with the foundational objectives of PAI, which emphasize the integration of faith (iman), practice (*amal*), and moral conduct (*akhlaq*) (Hendawi et al., 2024; Khikam et al., 2025). However, empirical evaluations of the merdeka curriculum in PAI rarely incorporate these broader developmental dimensions.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya as the research site. As an Islamic-based elementary school operating within the Muhammadiyah educational system, the school provides a relevant and strategic context for examining the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in Islamic Education (PAI). SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya integrates formal classroom instruction with religious habituation programs and co-curricular activities, thereby offering a rich environment to explore both instructional and non-instructional impacts of the curriculum. Despite its relevance, systematic, evaluation-based research on the Merdeka curriculum in PAI at this institutional level remains limited.

To overcome the methodological limitations of prior studies, this research applies a goal-free evaluation model, which deliberately minimizes attention to officially stated curriculum objectives and instead focuses on identifying actual outcomes experienced by students. By employing this approach, the study seeks to capture a more authentic picture of how the merdeka curriculum in PAI influences students' religious understanding, learning engagement, character formation, spiritual awareness, and social behavior at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya.

The novelty of this study lies in three main contributions. First, it introduces goal-free evaluation as an alternative and underutilized evaluative framework for assessing the merdeka curriculum in Islamic education at the junior secondary level. Second, it integrates instructional and non-instructional impacts within a single analytical framework, offering a more holistic understanding of curriculum effectiveness. Third, by situating the evaluation within SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya, this study provides context-specific empirical evidence from a Muhammadiyah school, thereby enriching the broader discourse on faith-based education and national curriculum reform in Indonesia.

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METHOD

This study employed a qualitative evaluative research design grounded in the goal-free evaluation model to examine the implementation of the merdeka curriculum in Islamic education. Goal-free evaluation was selected as the central methodological framework because it deliberately minimizes reliance on formally stated curriculum objectives and instead focuses on identifying the actual instructional and non-instructional effects experienced by students. This approach is particularly appropriate for evaluating complex educational programs in which outcomes related to values, character, spirituality, and social behavior may emerge implicitly and are not always captured through predefined indicators (Scriven, 1991).

The qualitative orientation of the study aligns with the epistemological assumptions of GFE, which emphasize naturalistic inquiry, participant perspectives, and contextual understanding of program effects. Rather than measuring curriculum effectiveness against predetermined standards, the evaluation sought to document observable changes, lived experiences, and perceived impacts of PAI learning under the merdeka curriculum as enacted in everyday school practices. Such an approach is consistent with contemporary evaluative research that views educational programs as socially constructed and context-dependent phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya, an Islamic-based junior high school operating within the Muhammadiyah educational system. The school implements the merdeka curriculum in PAI while simultaneously integrating Muhammadiyah values through religious habituation programs, character education initiatives, and co-curricular activities. This institutional setting provides a meaningful context for goal-free evaluation, as curriculum implementation is shaped not only by national policy directives but also by organizational culture, religious ethos, and community expectations. Previous studies have noted that Muhammadiyah schools often enact Islamic education through both formal instruction and informal value transmission embedded in school routines, making them particularly suitable for evaluating non-instructional curriculum impacts (Ridlwan & Asrori, 2022).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure access to information-rich cases relevant to the evaluation focus. The participants included PAI teachers who directly implemented the merdeka curriculum, students from different grade levels who were actively involved in PAI learning and religious activities, and school leaders responsible for curriculum coordination. In line with goal-free evaluation principles, participant selection prioritized diversity of experience and depth of insight rather than statistical representativeness (Scriven, 1991; Patton, 2015).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis to enable methodological triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of changes, benefits, and challenges associated with PAI learning under the merdeka curriculum. Interview protocols were intentionally designed without reference to official curriculum goals or expected competencies, focusing instead on participants' experiences, observed changes in student behavior, learning engagement, and perceived developmental outcomes. This strategy was employed to minimize goal bias and remain faithful to the core logic of goal-free evaluation (Scriven, 1991).

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Observations were conducted in PAI classrooms, religious habituation activities, and selected co-curricular programs to capture naturally occurring instructional and non-instructional phenomena. Observation focused on student participation, interaction patterns, expressions of moral reasoning, religious practice, discipline, and social behavior. By emphasizing emergent outcomes rather than goal attainment, observation data provided critical insight into how curriculum implementation influenced students beyond formal instructional settings (Patton, 2015).

Document analysis complemented interview and observation data by examining lesson plans, teaching modules, school activity schedules, and reflective records. Rather than assessing alignment with official curriculum objectives, documents were analyzed to contextualize instructional practices and triangulate observed outcomes. Document analysis served as a supportive data source to enhance analytic depth and confirm consistency across data types (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis was conducted using inductive thematic analysis. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns and themes related to instructional and non-instructional impacts. The analytic process followed iterative stages of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and thematic refinement. Consistent with goal-free evaluation, themes were allowed to emerge from the data rather than being imposed by predefined evaluative categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Identified themes were subsequently organized into two broad domains: instructional impacts, including learning engagement, religious understanding, and reflective reasoning; and non-instructional impacts, including character formation, spiritual awareness, discipline, and social behavior.

To ensure the trustworthiness of findings, the study applied criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation and prolonged engagement in the research setting. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process to support dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining formal permission from school authorities, securing informed consent from all participants, and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study employs goal-free evaluation as the primary evaluative lens to examine the implementation of the merdeka curriculum in Islamic education at SMP Muhammadiyah 15 Surabaya. Departing from conventional goal-oriented evaluation models, this framework does not assess curriculum effectiveness based on predefined objectives or official performance indicators. Instead, it prioritizes the identification of actual educational effects as they are experienced by students within the natural setting of curriculum enactment. Within this framework, the implementation of the merdeka curriculum in PAI is conceptualized as the core intervention, situated in a specific institutional and cultural context characterized by Muhammadiyah educational values and practices. This contextual positioning acknowledges that curriculum implementation is inherently shaped by school culture, religious ethos, and pedagogical traditions, which collectively influence the nature of educational

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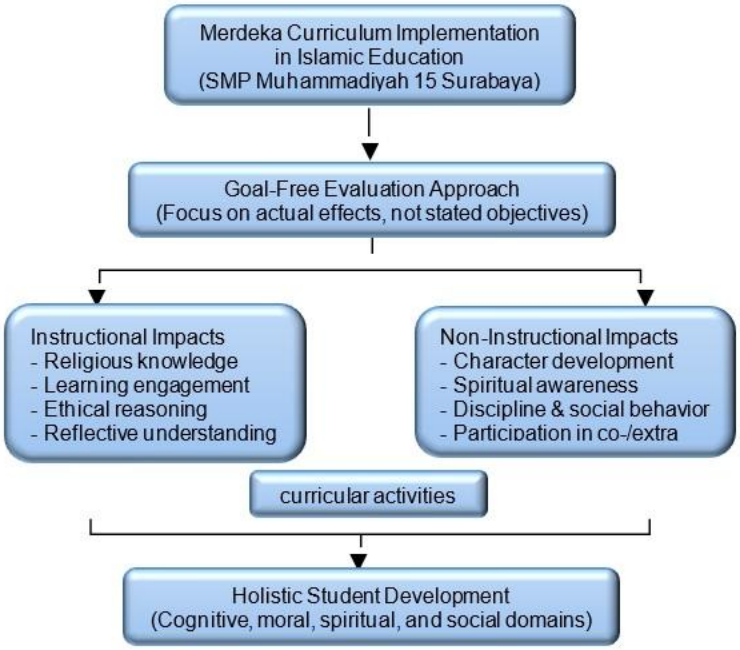
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outcomes.

Through the application of goal-free evaluation, the framework systematically explores two interrelated domains of impact. The first domain encompasses instructional outcomes, including students' religious understanding, learning engagement, and reflective reasoning developed through classroom-based learning processes. The second domain comprises non-instructional outcomes, such as character formation, spiritual awareness, discipline, and social behavior, which emerge through school culture, religious habituation, and co-curricular experiences. Together, these domains are understood to contribute to students' holistic development, integrating cognitive, moral, spiritual, and social dimensions of learning.

By foregrounding actual student experiences and emergent outcomes, this conceptual framework provides a comprehensive basis for evaluating the merdeka curriculum in PAI beyond formal curriculum targets. It thus offers a context-sensitive and methodologically robust approach to understanding curriculum effectiveness in faith-based junior high schools, while addressing existing gaps in curriculum evaluation research.

Picture 1. Framework



Instructional Impacts

From an instructional perspective, the implementation of the merdeka curriculum in Islamic education at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya demonstrates a clear shift toward more student-centered and experiential learning practices, resulting in multiple dimensions of instructional impact. Classroom observations indicate that PAI instruction increasingly integrates contextual discussions, reflective questioning, and project-based activities that are closely connected to students' everyday religious and social experiences. These instructional practices not only contribute to the strengthening of students' religious knowledge but also foster deeper understanding, as learners are encouraged to interpret Islamic teachings within real-life contexts

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rather than merely memorizing instructional content.

These instructional changes were consistently articulated by the PAI teacher at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya, Zubaidi, M.Pd, during interviews. He emphasized that the flexible structure of the merdeka curriculum provides greater pedagogical autonomy, enabling teachers to move beyond textbook-oriented instruction and to design learning activities that are more responsive to students' interests, classroom dynamics, and the real moral issues encountered by adolescents. According to Zubaidi, M.Pd, this flexibility allows religious knowledge to be conveyed in a more meaningful and applicable manner, thereby promoting reflective understanding rather than surface-level comprehension.

In practice, this pedagogical shift is reflected in increased student learning engagement at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya. Students from classes V reported higher levels of participation and confidence in expressing their understanding of Islamic concepts, particularly during discussions related to ethical decision-making, social responsibility, and contemporary moral challenges. Students felt more comfortable articulating their opinions, posing questions, and responding to their peers' perspectives, indicating that the learning environment supported active engagement and dialogical interaction. This pattern suggests that learning engagement emerged as a salient instructional impact, even though it was not explicitly formulated as a formal curriculum target.

Furthermore, the integration of real-life cases and problem-based discussions in PAI learning at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya encouraged students to develop ethical reasoning by evaluating various moral dilemmas through Islamic perspectives. Classroom interactions revealed that students were increasingly able to articulate arguments grounded in religious values, social considerations, and personal reflection, rather than providing purely normative responses. This finding indicates a shift from normative instruction toward more analytical and evaluative learning.

From a Goal-Free Evaluation perspective, the most prominent instructional impacts are not reflected in standardized test results or formal achievement indicators, but rather in tangible changes in students' learning behaviors and cognitive processes at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya. These changes include greater initiative in classroom discussions, stronger engagement with religious content, and increased analytical depth in interpreting Islamic texts and ethical issues. These findings are consistent with empirical studies demonstrating that student-centered and inquiry-based pedagogies promoted within the merdeka curriculum enhance religious understanding, learning engagement, and higher-order thinking skills (Patahuddin et al., 2024; Nur Hakim et al., 2024). Moreover, the findings reinforce previous research highlighting that reflective and ethical reasoning develops more effectively in learning environments that emphasize dialogue and contextualization rather than rigid instructional targets (Nirmalasari et al., 2024; Firnanda et al., 2025).

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Table 1. Instructional Impacts of Islamic Education Learning Based on Goal-Free Evaluation

Instructional Indicator	Data Sources	Empirical Findings	Evaluative Meaning (GFE Perspective)
Religious Knowledge	Classroom observations; interview with PAI teacher (Mr. Zubaidi, M.Pd)	PAI instruction integrates contextual discussions, case studies, and small-scale projects that connect learning materials with students' religious and social experiences. Students not only comprehend basic Islamic concepts but are also able to relate them to real-life situations in their daily lives.	Religious knowledge develops in an applied and meaningful manner, emerging as an actual instructional outcome without direct reference to formal cognitive targets.
Learning Engagement	Classroom observations; interviews with students from classes 8D, 8E, and 8F	There is an increase in active participation, willingness to ask questions, and confidence in expressing opinions during PAI lessons. The classroom atmosphere becomes more dialogical and interactive, with students actively engaged in ethical and social discussions.	Learning engagement emerges as a primary instructional impact that is emergent in nature, reflecting changes in learning behavior that were not explicitly designed as formal curriculum indicators.
Ethical Reasoning	Observation of classroom discussions; interviews with teachers and students	Students demonstrate the ability to analyze moral dilemmas (honesty, social responsibility, social relationships) by referring to Islamic values and social considerations. Their responses are argumentative rather than merely normative.	Ethical reasoning develops as a result of contextual learning interactions, indicating a shift from normative to analytical learning without explicit evaluative goal intervention.
Reflective Understanding	Observation of classroom reflections; student interviews	Students begin to reflect on the meaning of Islamic teachings in relation to their personal attitudes and behaviors. Reflective discussions encourage	Reflective understanding emerges as a latent impact of PAI learning, demonstrating deeper

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	students to explain the moral and spiritual reasoning behind a value, rather than simply identifying right or wrong.	internalization of values and alignment with the principles of goal-free evaluation.

Non-Instructional Impacts

Beyond formal classroom instruction, the evaluation revealed substantial non-instructional impacts that contributed significantly to students' holistic development at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya. Observations conducted beyond instructional settings—particularly during daily school routines and religious activities—indicated increased consistency in students' participation in congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, and ethical conduct in their interactions with peers and teachers. These recurring patterns suggest that Islamic values were not merely transmitted through formal lessons but were progressively internalized through sustained exposure within the school environment.

Zubaidi, M.Pd., revealed that students' educational achievements do not occur instantaneously; rather, they are the result of a continuous developmental process fostered through structured and consistent religious habituation programs. These programs encompass daily worship practices, the internalization of Islamic moral values, and spiritual guidance that is integrally embedded within both instructional activities and students' everyday school life. Furthermore, Zubaidi emphasized that the effectiveness of religious habituation is significantly enhanced when students are actively engaged in co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Through such activities, students not only strengthen their cognitive understanding of religious teachings but also develop religious attitudes, social responsibility, discipline, and collaborative skills. Consequently, the synergy between religious habituation programs and active participation in supporting activities emerges as a key factor in the sustainable development of students' religious and holistic character.

Complementing this perspective, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, Luthfiatin, M.Pd, highlighted that the implementation of the merdeka curriculum intentionally provides flexibility for schools to integrate value-based education across both academic and non-academic domains. She noted that character building, spirituality, and discipline were deliberately reinforced through school culture and daily practices rather than being confined to formal lesson plans or explicitly stated instructional objectives. This insight underscores the strategic role of curriculum leadership in enabling the emergence of non-instructional outcomes.

In terms of character development, students exhibited noticeable improvements in self-discipline, empathy, honesty, and social responsibility. These changes were evident in daily behaviors such as respectful communication, cooperative problem-solving, and accountability in fulfilling shared responsibilities. Students' narratives further revealed that such character growth was strongly influenced by participatory experiences in Islamic clubs, collective worship activities, and social service initiatives, which provided concrete contexts for the practical enactment of Islamic ethical values.

Regarding spiritual awareness, students demonstrated heightened consistency and sincerity in religious observance. Participation in routine devotional practices was

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increasingly perceived not as compulsory compliance but as an expression of personal commitment and spiritual reflection. According to Luthfiatin, M.Pd, this internalization of spirituality reflects the success of embedding Islamic values into the school's hidden curriculum, where spiritual growth is nurtured through habituation and exemplary practices rather than formal assessment mechanisms.

The evaluation also identified strengthened discipline and social behavior among students. Improved punctuality, adherence to school rules, and respectful social interactions indicated that Islamic values functioned as a moral framework guiding students' conduct across both academic and non-academic contexts. These behavioral improvements were reinforced through continuous engagement in structured religious routines and socially oriented activities, contributing to a more orderly and supportive school climate.

Furthermore, active participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities—including Islamic student organizations, charity programs, and community service—emerged as a key driver of these non-instructional impacts. Such activities enhanced students' leadership skills, teamwork, and sense of communal responsibility, while simultaneously reinforcing character formation and spiritual awareness. From the perspective of curriculum management, Luthfiatin, M.Pd emphasized that these activities are viewed as integral extensions of the merdeka curriculum's holistic educational vision rather than as peripheral programs.

Consistent with previous studies, these findings align with literature emphasizing the role of informal and hidden curricula in shaping moral, spiritual, and social development within Islamic education (Hendawi et al., 2024; Asrori et al., 2024). Additionally, the observed strengthening of discipline and social competence corroborates empirical evidence on the positive effects of co-curricular and extracurricular engagement on students' behavioral and emotional development (Mekuria et al., 2024; Dirgantara et al., 2025).

From a goal-free evaluative perspective, these non-instructional impacts constitute critical indicators of curriculum effectiveness that would likely remain underrepresented in evaluations focused solely on cognitive achievement or instructional performance. The emergence of character development, spiritual awareness, discipline, and active participation in co-/extracurricular activities affirms the value of Goal-Free Evaluation in capturing the holistic educational influence of Islamic Religious Education within a faith-based school context.

Table 2. Non-Instructional Impacts of Islamic Religious Education Based on Goal-Free Evaluation

Non-Instructional Indicator	Data Sources	Empirical Findings	Evaluative Meaning (GFE Perspective)
Character Development	Observation of daily routines; student interviews; interview with religious affairs	Students demonstrate increased honesty, empathy, responsibility, and respectful behavior in both academic and	Character formation emerges as a latent educational outcome shaped by habituation and school culture rather than explicit

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	coordinator	non-academic contexts.	curricular objectives.
Spiritual Awareness	Observation of religious activities; interviews with school staff and students	Greater consistency and sincerity in congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, and devotional practices indicate deeper spiritual internalization.	Spiritual awareness develops as a non-instructional impact rooted in religious habituation and the hidden curriculum.
Discipline & Social Behavior	Observation of school routines; interviews with teachers and students	Improved punctuality, rule compliance, self-control, and respectful social interaction among students.	Discipline and social behavior emerge as unintended yet significant outcomes of value integration across school life.
Participation in Co-/Extracurricular Activities	Observation of Islamic clubs and social programs; student interviews	Active involvement in Islamic clubs, collective worship, and social service initiatives enhances leadership, teamwork, and social responsibility.	Co-/extracurricular participation functions as a catalyst for holistic development beyond formal instructional domains.

Holistic Student Development

The implementation of goal-free evaluation in assessing the merdeka curriculum in Islamic education at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya revealed a pattern of holistic student development encompassing cognitive, moral, spiritual, and social domains. Based on in-depth interviews with key stakeholders—namely the PAI teacher (Zubaidi, M.Pd), the vice principal for curriculum affairs (Luthfiatin, M.Pd), and fifth-grade students—alongside systematic classroom and school-wide observations, the evaluation documented a range of instructional and non-instructional impacts that emerged naturally from everyday educational practices. Consistent with the core principles of GFE, the evaluation did not begin with predefined curriculum objectives, but instead focused on actual outcomes experienced by participants. This approach corroborates Scriven's assertion that educational programs often generate meaningful and unanticipated effects that remain underrepresented in goal-oriented evaluation models. Within the context of the merdeka curriculum, such an approach proved particularly relevant, given its emphasis on flexibility, contextual learning, and learner autonomy (Jasiah et al., 2024).

From a cognitive perspective, students demonstrated enhanced conceptual understanding and analytical thinking in PAI learning. Classroom observations revealed that instructional practices—such as contextual discussions, case-based learning, and reflective questioning—enabled students to move beyond rote

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memorization toward meaningful comprehension of Islamic concepts. Students were able to relate doctrinal knowledge to real-life ethical and social issues, indicating the development of higher-order thinking skills. This finding aligns with prior studies highlighting the merdeka curriculum's potential to strengthen critical and reflective thinking through flexible pedagogical designs (Nabilah & Suyanto, 2025; Patahuddin et al., 2024). Importantly, these cognitive gains emerged without explicit alignment to standardized cognitive targets, reinforcing the value of GFE in capturing authentic learning outcomes that arise from adaptive instructional practices rather than rigid curricular prescriptions.

In the moral domain, the evaluation identified significant growth in students' character development, particularly in terms of honesty, responsibility, empathy, and ethical reasoning. Students' daily interactions reflected greater moral awareness, including respectful communication, cooperative behavior, and accountability in fulfilling shared responsibilities. These outcomes were not solely attributable to formal instruction, but rather to the integration of Islamic ethical values across the school culture. This finding resonates with Islamic moral philosophy emphasizing habituation (*ta'wīd*) and character formation through practice, as articulated in classical ethical thought and contemporary moral education frameworks (Hendawi et al., 2024; Shafwan & Asrori, 2025). Moreover, it supports empirical evidence suggesting that character education is most effective when embedded within the lived experiences of students rather than treated as an isolated instructional component (Rusilowati et al., 2024; Nizariah et al., 2025).

In terms of spiritual awareness, students demonstrated increased consistency and sincerity in engaging with religious practices, including congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, and devotional routines. Observations indicated that these practices were no longer perceived merely as institutional obligations, but increasingly reflected internalized spiritual commitment. Interviews with the religious affairs coordinator highlighted that such spiritual development was fostered through religious habituation programs and the modeling of religious conduct by teachers, rather than through formal assessment mechanisms. This finding supports research emphasizing the compatibility of the merdeka curriculum with Islamic values when implemented through a holistic and culturally embedded approach (Amalia et al., 2025; Wafa et al., 2024). From a GFE perspective, spirituality emerged as a latent outcome—deeply meaningful yet rarely captured by conventional evaluative indicators.

The evaluation also revealed notable improvements in social competence and discipline. Students exhibited better self-regulation, punctuality, adherence to school rules, and respectful social interactions. These behavioral changes were reinforced through continuous engagement in structured school routines and value-based social interactions, suggesting that Islamic values functioned as a moral framework guiding students' conduct across academic and non-academic contexts. These findings are consistent with broader empirical evidence demonstrating the positive relationship between value-based education, school climate, and students' behavioral development (Damanik et al., 2025; Syofyan et al., 2024). Moreover, they echo studies indicating that discipline and social responsibility are effectively cultivated through participatory and contextual educational environments rather than through punitive or compliance-driven approaches alone (Okumu, 2025).

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Table 3. Holistic Student Development Outcomes Based on Goal-Free Evaluation

Development Domain	Key Indicators	Data Sources	Empirical Findings	Evaluative (GFE Perspective)
Cognitive Development	Conceptual understanding; critical and analytical thinking; contextual application of Islamic teachings	Classroom observations; interviews with PAI teacher and students	Students demonstrate deeper understanding of Islamic concepts and are able to relate religious knowledge to real-life ethical and social issues through discussion, case analysis, and reflection.	Cognitive growth emerges as an authentic instructional outcome shaped by flexible pedagogy, without direct reference to predefined cognitive targets.
Moral / Character Development	Honesty; responsibility; empathy; ethical reasoning	Observation of daily school routines; interviews with students and school staff	Students exhibit improved moral awareness, respectful communication, cooperation, and accountability in daily interactions.	Character development appears as a latent outcome influenced by school culture and value habituation rather than explicit curricular objectives.
Spiritual Development	Religious commitment; spiritual reflection; consistency in worship practices	Observation of religious activities; interviews with religious affairs coordinator and students	Increased consistency and sincerity in congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, and devotional activities reflect internalized spiritual awareness.	Spirituality develops as a non-instructional impact rooted in religious habituation and the hidden curriculum.

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Social Development & Discipline	Self-regulation; social interaction; rule compliance; discipline	Observation of school routines; interviews with teachers and students	Students show improved punctuality, adherence to school rules, respectful social behavior, and constructive peer interaction.	Social discipline emerges as an unintended but significant educational effect across academic and non-academic contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study evaluated the implementation of the merdeka curriculum in Islamic education at SD Muhammadiyah 21 Surabaya using a goal-free evaluation approach, focusing on instructional and non-instructional impacts on students' development. The findings show that, at the instructional level, the curriculum promotes student-centered and contextual learning, resulting in increased learning engagement, deeper religious understanding, enhanced ethical reasoning, and more reflective engagement with Islamic teachings. These outcomes emerged organically from flexible pedagogical practices rather than from predefined curriculum targets, confirming the relevance of GFE in capturing authentic instructional effects. Beyond classroom instruction, the evaluation identified substantial non-instructional impacts that significantly shaped students' character, spiritual awareness, discipline, and social behavior. Through religious habituation programs, school culture, and participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities, students demonstrated stronger moral dispositions, greater consistency in worship practices, and improved social competence. These findings underscore the importance of the hidden curriculum and everyday school practices in achieving the foundational aims of Islamic education, which are often underrepresented in goal-oriented evaluation models.

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the utility of goal-free evaluation as an alternative framework for assessing the merdeka curriculum in Islamic education, particularly in capturing unintended and emergent outcomes. It also integrates instructional and non-instructional impacts within a holistic analytical perspective, offering a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum effectiveness. Although limited to a single Muhammadiyah junior high school, the findings provide context-specific empirical evidence that enriches discussions on faith-based education and national curriculum reform, while suggesting the need for broader and longitudinal evaluations in future research.

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