



The Role of Islamic Education Teachers in Shaping Students' Character After the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Junior High Schools of Rantau Selamat District

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to investigate the role, methodologies, effects, and challenges faced by Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers in influencing student character subsequent to the adoption of the Independent Curriculum in junior high schools within Rantau Selamat District. Utilizing a qualitative field research approach, data were gathered from school administrators, IRE teachers, and vice principals for curriculum through observations, interviews, and recording. The results show that IRE instructors play a planned role in teaching religious principles, discipline, responsibility, and tolerance through structured activities such congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, religious mentoring, and encouraging respect for others. Character education techniques stress learning by doing, like doing community work, keeping the school clean, taking part in Islamic festivities, and using rewards and punishments to teach discipline. These efforts have had an effect on both individuals and institutions. For example, students have shown positive changes in their behavior, and schools have seen their religious culture grow stronger through regular tadarus, communal worship, Friday charity programs, and the creation of Islamic spiritual organizations (ROHIS). Character development initiatives encounter obstacles, particularly constrained instructional time and inadequate backing from students' familial and societal contexts.

1. Introduction

The *Merdeka Belajar* (Independent Learning) education system continues to prioritize character education (Aji et al., 2023). The Pancasila Student Profile, which consists of six aspects that are elaborated in detail within each of its components, is one of the ways the Merdeka Curriculum strengthens character education among learners (Mubarak et al., 2023). Piety to God Almighty, commendable morals, tolerance for differences, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity are some of these aspects (Haq & Wakidi, 2024). In order to encourage students and teachers to develop independent spiritual character, the core value of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is freedom of thought. This is because learning has long relied solely on material from books or modules, which limits students' and teachers' opportunities to learn from their environment (Hasil et al., 2023). If this freedom of learning is adopted within Indonesia's education

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system, students' character can develop more effectively because they become accustomed to learning and broadening their knowledge based on real events occurring in their surroundings. Since children learn directly from their own experiences throughout independent learning, they will develop a caring attitude as well as confidence, skills, and harmony with their environment. It is vital to encourage the growth of this mindset because it shapes individuals to be good and adaptable(Latifa et al., 2023). Most student behaviors emerge due to the influence of peers or their home environment. This is closely related to the formation of students' character. If such behaviors are left unaddressed, students will continue to act in that manner and will find it difficult to change, especially when negative character traits begin to influence their peers(Hadi et al., 2023).

Based on initial observations at SMPN 1 and SMPN 4 Rantau Selamat, students at this age begin forming their self-identity, values, and behaviors that will influence their future. Unfortunately, various character issues often appear in the school environment, such as a lack of discipline demonstrated by frequent lateness or absence without notice, indicating a lack of responsibility regarding time. Students often ignore school rules for example, talking during class, using mobile phones, or failing to show respect toward teachers and peers(Wibowo et al., 2025). Students also frequently fail to complete school assignments, reflecting low motivation and commitment to learning. Impulsive behavior is also common, meaning students tend to act without thinking ahead and often engage in actions that disrupt the classroom or learning environment. Additionally, many students neglect cleanliness, leaving trash scattered and showing little concern for the school environment. These issues may be caused by a lack of understanding about the importance of discipline, insufficient parental supervision, or negative environmental influences(Swandana et al., 2023).

Another issue that arises at SMP Rantau Selamat is bullying behavior, in which students often experience insults, ridicule, or threats from their peers, ultimately damaging their self-confidence. Social exclusion also occurs at SMP Rantau Selamat, where bullying takes the form of isolating victims by avoiding or refusing to include them in group interactions(Yunitasari et al., 2023). Many students lack awareness that their actions constitute bullying, making it difficult to stop such behavior. Bullying is a serious problem that can have harmful effects on its victims. This behavior may stem from a lack of empathy, a desire to assert dominance, or the influence of an unhealthy environment(Zamista & Deswita, 2023).

SMP Rantau Selamat is a junior high school located in the Rantau Selamat District, East Aceh Regency. Like most junior high schools, the formal education process at SMP Rantau Selamat spans three years, from grade 7 to grade 9. This school serves as one of the institutions responsible for shaping student character. The character issues found among students at SMP Rantau Selamat represent a complex challenge, yet they can be addressed through collaborative efforts from all parties involved(Syahrir et al., 2024). Strengthening character education, enhancing cooperation between parents and teachers, providing counseling programs, and creating a positive school environment are key elements in cultivating a responsible and well-characterized younger generation(Sari et al., 2023).

Since the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, Indonesia's educational paradigm has shifted from a content-oriented approach to one that emphasizes competency and character development(Rohmah et al., 2023). This curriculum requires teachers to become learning facilitators capable of fostering students' character growth through meaningful and contextual learning experiences(Ferdaus & Novita, 2023). In the junior high schools of Rantau Selamat District, Islamic Education (PAI) teachers play a fundamental role in shaping students' character, as PAI directly relates to moral, ethical, and spiritual values(Muhammad et al., 2023).

Given the importance of the Islamic Education (PAI) teacher's role in shaping students' Islamic character, professional and competent PAI teachers are essential for producing students with strong moral character (Fauzan et al., 2023). However, in practice, there are various challenges and obstacles faced by PAI teachers in carrying out this role. Among them is the limited training and professional development opportunities in the area of character education (Ndari et al., 2023). Although they possess adequate knowledge of Islamic teachings, some teachers feel insufficiently competent in implementing effective and relevant character-education methods that meet the needs of today's learners.

In addition, the existing curriculum often does not provide enough space for character development, as it tends to prioritize academic achievement and mastery of subject content. Furthermore, collaboration between PAI teachers and teachers of other subjects remains suboptimal. Character education should be a shared responsibility among all teaching staff, not the sole responsibility of PAI teachers. However, in practice, character education is often viewed as the exclusive duty of PAI teachers, resulting in ineffective collaboration in integrating character values across subjects.

Based on this background, the author is inspired to conduct a study on The Role of Islamic Education Teachers in Shaping Students' Character After the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Junior High Schools in Rantau Selamat District.

2. Methodology

This type of research is field research. The researcher analyzes and describes the study objectively and in detail to obtain accurate results related to the research focus, which is directed at the role of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in shaping students' character at junior high schools in the Rantau Selamat District. This study employs a qualitative approach. By using a qualitative approach, the researcher is able to understand how PAI teachers perform their roles in daily practice when shaping students' character—a process that takes place within the school environment (Adlini et al., 2022). This allows the researcher to obtain authentic data from PAI teachers, students, principals, and other relevant parties. This is essential to ensure that the results of the study truly reflect the actual conditions in the junior high schools located in Rantau Selamat District.

This research was conducted from October to November 2025 at SMP Negeri 1 Rantau Selamat, SMP Negeri 2 Rantau Selamat, and SMP Negeri 4 Rantau Selamat. The data sources in this study include primary and secondary data. The primary data sources consist of PAI teachers as the main informants, school principals, and vice principals in charge of curriculum affairs. The secondary data sources include scientific writings, book references, and documentation materials related to the research topic.

The data collection techniques used in this study are observation, interviews, and documentation. The data analysis techniques consist of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The triangulation technique applied in this research is technical triangulation. Through this triangulation, the researcher compares and confirms the results obtained from the three data collection techniques to ensure valid and objective data regarding the role of PAI teachers in shaping students' character after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools in Rantau Selamat District.

3. Results

3.1 The Role of Islamic Education Teachers in Shaping Students' Character After the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Junior High Schools in Rantau Selamat District

The role of Islamic Education teachers in shaping students' character after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 and SMP Negeri 4 Rantau Selamat shows that PAI teachers have a highly significant contribution. Their role is not limited to the transfer of religious knowledge but also functions as a reinforcement of character values that form the core of national education.

The efforts of PAI teachers in instilling the values of religiosity, discipline, responsibility, and tolerance at SMP Negeri 1 and SMP Negeri 4 Rantau Selamat align with Islamic educational theory, which emphasizes the integration of knowledge, faith, and action. From Al-Ghazali's perspective, education aims not only to sharpen the intellect but also to purify the soul and shape noble character (*tahdzib al-nafs*) (Heri Gunawan, 2019). This can be seen in the habituation of reading the Qur'an, communal prayers, and congregational worship facilitated by PAI teachers, as these practices do not merely teach religious knowledge cognitively but also cultivate students' spiritual awareness.

The cultivation of discipline also aligns with the concept of *mujahadah an-nafs* in Islamic education, which refers to training oneself to remain consistent in obedience both in worship and in adhering to school regulations (Marzuki, 2017). Meanwhile, assigning responsibilities such as classroom duties or academic tasks reflects the implementation of the Islamic value of trustworthiness (*amanah*), as emphasized in Surah Al-Ahzab verse 72:

إِنَّا عَرَضْنَا الْأَمَانَةَ عَلَى السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالْجِبَالِ فَأَبَيْنَ أَنْ يَحْمِلْنَهَا وَأَشْفَقْنَ مِنْهَا وَحَمَلَهَا
الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّهُ كَانَ ظَلُومًا جَهُولًا

Meaning: "Indeed, We offered the trust to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were fearful of it; yet man undertook it. Indeed, he is ever unjust and ignorant." (Q.S. Al-Ahzab: 72)

In Surah Al-Ahzab verse 72, it is emphasized that *amanah* (trust) is a great responsibility that Allah offered to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, yet all of them refused to bear it due to its immense weight. Only human beings accepted it, even though they are at risk of becoming unjust and ignorant if they fail to fulfill it properly. This indicates that *amanah* is not merely a trust or promise but a duty that must be carried out with full awareness and responsibility. In daily life, *amanah* is reflected in various aspects, such as keeping promises, fulfilling religious obligations, maintaining confidentiality, and carrying out one's duties within the family, workplace, and society with honesty and fairness. Therefore, *amanah* is a fundamental value that requires sincerity, integrity, and a strong sense of responsibility so that humans do not fall into the category of those who are unjust and at loss.

The cultivation of tolerance carried out by PAI teachers aligns with the spirit of *ta'awun* (mutual help) and *tasamuh* (tolerance), which are key pillars in building harmony among communities. Thus, the methods of habituation, guidance, and role modeling employed by PAI teachers are consistent with the principles of Islamic education, which aim to shape *insan kamil* individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent but also of noble character, responsible, and able to live harmoniously amid diversity.

The role of PAI teachers as role models (*uswah hasanah*) in shaping students' character at SMP Negeri 1 and SMP Negeri 4 Rantau Selamat is highly relevant to Islamic educational theory. In Surah Al-Ahzab verse 21, it is affirmed that:

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُوا اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا

Meaning: "Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah (Muhammad) you have an excellent example for whoever hopes for (the mercy of) Allah and the Last Day and remembers Allah often." (Q.S. Al-Ahzab: 21)

This verse emphasizes that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the best role model for his followers; thus, the concept of *uswah hasanah* serves as the foundation of Islamic educational methodology. PAI teachers who demonstrate discipline by arriving on time, guiding students in worship, speaking politely, and maintaining good ethics in daily interactions are essentially applying an exemplary-based educational model as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad. This perspective aligns with the views of Ibn Miskawaih, who highlighted the importance of moral exemplification as the primary means of character formation, since students are more inclined to imitate real behavior than to merely receive theoretical advice.

Similarly, Al-Ghazali in *Ihya' Ulumuddin* asserted that an educator must practice the values they teach so that students experience an integration between knowledge and action. The exemplary behavior of PAI teachers in matters of discipline, responsibility, and tolerance reinforces the principles of Islamic education, which emphasize *tarbiyah bil hal* (education through action), where values are taught through concrete behavior rather than words alone.

With PAI teachers serving as role models, students find it easier to internalize the values of religiosity, discipline, responsibility, and tolerance because they directly witness how these values are applied in everyday life. This is in line with the goals of Islamic education, which seek to develop individuals with noble character who are capable of balancing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions in their lives. Thus, the role of PAI teachers as *uswah hasanah* not only strengthens students' mastery of religious theory but also ensures that such theory becomes alive through practical examples that learners can emulate.

3.2 Methods Used by Islamic Education Teachers in Shaping Students' Character at Junior High Schools in Rantau Selamat District

PAI teachers in the junior high schools of Rantau Selamat District implement learning methods oriented toward shaping students' character. These methods are not limited to the delivery of theoretical material but also emphasize real-life practice in daily activities. This aligns with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes experiential, contextual, and student-centered learning. Religious education in this context does not merely address the cognitive aspect but also touches on affective and psychomotor domains, making it closer to the goals of Islamic education, which emphasize the unity of faith, knowledge, and action.

Based on the findings of the study, there are two main methods consistently applied by PAI teachers: (a) the use of project-based or practical approaches, and (b) the implementation of an educational reward-and-punishment system. These two methods are considered representative because they combine participatory and normative dimensions while instilling the awareness that every action has consequences.

The project-based approach applied by PAI teachers at SMP Negeri 1 and SMP Negeri 4 Rantau Selamat demonstrates that religious learning is not merely theoretical but also applicable in everyday life. Through activities such as Qur'an recitation (*tadarus*), the Friday Cleanup Program, classroom charity boxes (*infak*), and social service actions, students directly experience how Islamic teachings are put into practice.

From the perspective of Islamic education, this method aligns with the concept of integrating knowledge and action. Al-Ghazali emphasized that the primary goal of education is not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the formation of noble character through the habituation of righteous deeds (Marzuki, 2017). Knowledge without practice is considered useless, while practice

without knowledge holds no value. Thus, project-based learning becomes a medium that connects religious knowledge with real action, enabling students to experience the true meaning of the teachings they study.

Furthermore, this approach also aligns with the theory of habituation. Ibn Miskawaih in *Tahdzib al-Akhlaq* highlighted that character can be formed through consistent training and habituation. When students become accustomed to practicing cleanliness, charity, and cooperation, the values of religiosity, discipline, responsibility, and social concern become ingrained within them (Kemendikdas, 2020).

Philosophically, project-based learning also reflects the principle of *tarbiyah bil hal* (education through concrete action). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) frequently provided direct practical examples rather than relying solely on verbal instructions. For instance, he participated in the construction of the Prophet's Mosque together with his companions. Therefore, PAI teachers who involve students in real activities are essentially following the Prophet's educational method—teaching through example and lived experience.

The reward and punishment method implemented by PAI teachers at SMP Negeri 1 and SMP Negeri 4 Rantau Selamat serves as an effective approach in shaping students' character. Rewards are given in the form of praise, additional grades, or the opportunity to lead prayers for students who demonstrate good behavior, while punishments are educational in nature—for example, additional tasks such as memorizing prayers, reading short surahs, or cleaning the school environment. Thus, rewards function to reinforce positive behavior, whereas punishments cultivate awareness of the consequences of negative actions.

From the perspective of Islamic education, this method aligns with the concept of *targhib wa tarhib*. *Targhib* refers to giving encouragement and motivation, either through promises of reward or recognition, while *tarhib* refers to warnings and deterrents meant to prevent misconduct. The Qur'an itself applies both of these approaches, such as the promise of Paradise for the obedient (Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 25) and warnings of punishment for those who disobey (Q.S. Al-Mulk: 6). Thus, reward and punishment are educational principles derived directly from divine methodology.

Prominent Islamic scholars also emphasize the importance of this method. Ibn Khaldun asserted that punishment may be applied, but it must be proportional and educational, not intended to create excessive fear. Likewise, Al-Ghazali emphasized that praise and appreciation can cultivate intrinsic motivation within students, while educational punishment is necessary to instill discipline and prevent deviant behavior.

Therefore, the implementation of reward and punishment in PAI learning at schools in the Rantau Selamat District is not merely a mechanism of behavioral control but also a means of Islamic moral development. This method teaches students that every action carries consequences, both in this world and in the hereafter. This is in line with the ultimate goal of Islamic education, which is to form individuals who are disciplined, responsible, and capable of evaluating their actions based on religious values.

3.3 The Impact of Islamic Education Teachers on Students' Character Formation at Junior High Schools in Rantau Selamat District

The impact of the role of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in shaping students' character can be observed through two key indicators: (a) changes in students' social behavior and (b) the strengthening of a religious school culture following the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These two indicators demonstrate that the presence of PAI teachers not only

influences individual student behavior but also contributes to creating a school climate that supports the growth of Islamic character values.

The role of PAI teachers has proven to have a significant effect on transforming students' social behavior. Prior to the consistent implementation of character-building strategies, some students exhibited behaviors that were not aligned with Islamic values, such as lack of discipline, low social awareness, and impolite communication. However, after PAI teachers applied practice-based learning methods combined with reward and punishment, students began to show more positive behavioral changes.

These changes are evident in several aspects. First, discipline students became more punctual, participated in routine school activities, and contributed to maintaining environmental cleanliness. Second, social concern students actively engaged in social service activities, communal work (gotong royong), and fundraising for disaster victims. Third, improved politeness students communicated more respectfully with teachers and peers.

From the perspective of Islamic education, these developments align with the concept of *tahdzib al-nafts* formulated by Al-Ghazali, which refers to the purification of the soul through training, habituation, and self-control so that noble character becomes permanent. Ibn Miskawaih also emphasized that character is formed through *al-'adah* (habituation), meaning that positive social behavior becomes character when consistently practiced. The behavioral transformation of students at SMP Negeri 1 and SMP Negeri 4 Rantau Selamat serves as concrete evidence that the exemplary conduct of PAI teachers, together with the habituation of Islamic values, has a real impact on students' character formation.

Thus, it can be concluded that the role of PAI teachers greatly contributes to shaping students to become more disciplined, responsible, caring, and polite. This aligns with the goals of Islamic education, namely to produce individuals who embody noble character in social life.

In addition to influencing individual behavior, PAI teachers also play a significant role in building a religious school culture. Following the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, religious activities at SMP Negeri 1 and SMP Negeri 4 Rantau Selamat have become more structured and varied, including Qur'an recitation before class, collective prayers, Friday charity (*infak*), Islamic holiday celebrations, and Islamic Spirituality (ROHIS) activities.

This religious culture is not merely a routine but has become part of the school's identity. An Islamic-oriented school environment encourages students to greet others with *salam*, maintain cleanliness in accordance with the values of *thaharah*, respect teachers, and interact politely with one another. The school climate has become more harmonious, disciplined, and conducive to learning.

Theoretically, this aligns with the concept of *tarbiyah ijtimaiyyah* in Islamic education, which emphasizes value formation within a social and communal context. A religious school culture reflects what Al-Ghazali refers to as *al-bi'ah ash-shalihah* (a righteous environment), a crucial factor in shaping good character. In this context, PAI teachers act as key agents in cultivating a religious school culture, ensuring that religious values are not confined to the classroom but become internalized in students' daily school life. Thus, the strengthening of religious culture following the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum demonstrates that the role of PAI teachers not only shapes students individually but also reinforces collective values within the school community.

3.4 Obstacles Faced by Islamic Education Teachers in Shaping Students' Character at Junior High Schools in Rantau Selamat District

Based on the research findings previously described, it was discovered that the main obstacles faced by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in shaping students' character at junior high schools in Rantau Selamat Subdistrict include limited instructional time and a lack of support from family and social environments. These two factors are interrelated and significantly affect the effectiveness of teachers in carrying out character education functions as mandated in the Merdeka Curriculum.

Limited instructional time has become a classic obstacle in the implementation of religious education in formal schools. In the Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education is allocated only two lesson hours per week. This condition aligns with the findings of Mujib and Rahman, who state that limited time makes it difficult for PAI teachers to integrate cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in a balanced manner during instruction. As a result, the process of instilling character values tends to be theoretical and lacks sufficient space for habituation and experiential learning.

Ideally, PAI teachers should not only act as instructors but also as moral guides and role models for students. However, due to time limitations, teachers are often required to prioritize achieving curriculum-based material targets, while character development through habituation, value dialogue, and religious practices cannot be carried out in depth. This is consistent with Zubaedi's view, which emphasizes that character education requires a continuous process through habituation and role modeling, not merely the delivery of materials in the classroom (Alimni, et al., 2021).

Thus, limited instructional time becomes a structural barrier that demands teachers to be more creative and efficient in utilizing learning time. PAI teachers in junior high schools in Rantau Selamat Subdistrict attempt to address this by integrating religious activities outside of lesson hours, such as morning Qur'an recitation, congregational prayers, or Islamic spiritual activities, as additional means of character formation.

The second obstacle found in this study is the lack of support from family and social environments. This finding reinforces Zubaedi's theory, which explains that a child's development is influenced by interactions between the individual and various surrounding environments, including family, school, and society. If the family and social environments do not support the cultivation of positive values, then the character education process at school will not be optimal.

In the context of junior high schools in Rantau Selamat Subdistrict, PAI teachers face the reality that some parents provide insufficient moral guidance and religious instruction at home. This aligns with Rahmah's research, which found that a lack of parental attention to children's worship habits affects students' religious behavior at school. In addition, social factors such as free association, digital media influences, and weak community control also contribute to the weakening of students' character.

The inconsistency between values taught at school and habits within the family environment causes students to experience moral confusion (moral dissonance), which leads to unstable attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, PAI teachers cannot work alone in shaping students' character; they require support and synergy from both families and the wider community.

To overcome this condition, schools can strengthen collaboration between PAI teachers, homeroom teachers, and parents through intensive communication, parenting activities, and parental involvement in school religious programs. This step aligns with Lickona's perspective, which states that character education succeeds when there is continuity of values between school, home, and community.

From the analysis above, it can be understood that the obstacles faced by PAI teachers are not only technical but also systemic and cultural. Limited instructional time requires pedagogical innovation from teachers, while the lack of support from family and social environments requires

cross-sector collaboration. Within the perspective of the Merdeka Curriculum, PAI teachers are expected to be more adaptive and reflective in shaping students' character through contextual, creative activities oriented toward the Pancasila Student Profile.

Thus, this discussion affirms that the effectiveness of character development does not depend solely on the competence of PAI teachers, but also on the involvement of the entire educational ecosystem schools, families, and communities in cultivating students who are morally upright, religious, and strong in character.

4. Conclusions

Based on the research findings and discussion in the previous chapter, several conclusions can be drawn as follows:

- 1) PAI teachers at junior high schools in Rantau Selamat Subdistrict play a methodical role in shaping students' character by instilling values of religiosity, discipline, responsibility, and tolerance. These efforts are carried out through habituation of religious activities, collective prayers, Qur'an recitation, guidance in congregational worship, the assignment of responsibilities, and the reinforcement of mutual respect. As a result, students not only understand character values cognitively but also internalize them in their daily behavior, such as becoming more disciplined, responsible, religious, and tolerant. PAI teachers function not only as instructors but also as role models who consistently demonstrate religious, disciplined, responsible, courteous, and tolerant behavior.
- 2) The methods used by PAI teachers in shaping students' character involve the application of experiential learning that directly engages students in various positive activities. This is manifested through activities such as social service, school environment cleaning, Qur'an recitation (tadarus), collective prayers, and active participation in Islamic holiday commemorations. Through these activities, students not only gain cognitive knowledge about religious values but are also trained to practice them in everyday life, thereby fostering spiritual awareness, social concern, and a sense of responsibility. PAI teachers also utilize reward-and-punishment-based learning methods aligned with the Islamic educational principle of *targhib wa tarhib*. Rewards are given in the form of praise, recognition, or special opportunities that motivate students to consistently perform good deeds.
- 3) The impact of PAI teachers on character formation is evident at two levels: (a) changes in students' social behavior, including increased discipline, responsibility, care, and courtesy in interactions; and (b) the strengthening of a school culture with a religious character following the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, reflected through routine religious activities, reinforcement of the Islamic Spiritual Organization (ROHIS), and the establishment of a harmonious and Islamic school climate. The role of PAI teachers in Rantau Selamat junior high schools not only influences the development of individual student character but also strengthens the collective religious culture of the school.
- 4) Obstacles faced by PAI teachers in character formation include limited instructional time and insufficient support from family and social environments. Limited instructional time prevents teachers from optimally instilling character values through ongoing habituation and role modeling. A dense curriculum and restricted lesson schedules often lead PAI teachers to prioritize completing the curriculum, which can result in less effective internalization of moral values. In addition, minimal support from family and social environments presents a separate challenge for character education.

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