

Pedagogical Transformation Through Student-Centered Learning in Islamic Religious Education under the Kurikulum Merdeka Framework: A Qualitative Case Study

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Article Info	Abstract
Article history: Submitted: Month xx, 20xx Revision: Month xx, 20xx Accepted: Month xx, 20xx Publish: Month xx, 20xx, (Editor's note)	This study examines how instructional planning, classroom facilitation, assessment, and institutional support interact in Student-Centered Learning (SCL) within Islamic Religious Education under Kurikulum Merdeka. A qualitative case study at SMP Muhammadiyah 7 Banyudono Program Khusus drew on five interviews dated 6 June 2026 with the principal, a PAI teacher, and three Grade VIII students, together with a completed classroom observation form and documentation records. Analysis followed data condensation, display, and conclusion verification. The findings identify topic-sensitive methods, teacher explanation combined with questioning and practice, process-oriented assessment, and support through supervision and monthly teacher discussion. Participation was uneven, and group cooperation, lesson time, and access to shared equipment posed constraints. Practical Fiqh activities connected religious understanding to performance, while approachable teacher-student relationships created opportunities for moral conversation. These findings suggest pathways toward value internalization, but do not establish sustained behavioural change. The article proposes a contextual model connecting four pedagogical dimensions and discusses its relevance to Indonesia's diverse Islamic educational institutions while retaining the Muhammadiyah identity of the case.
Keywords : Student-Centered Learning; Pedagogical Transformation; Islamic Religious Education; Kurikulum Merdeka; Meaningful Learning.	Abstrak Penelitian ini mengkaji hubungan perencanaan, fasilitasi pembelajaran, asesmen, dan dukungan kelembagaan dalam Student-Centered Learning (SCL) pada Pendidikan Agama Islam dan Budi Pekerti dalam Kurikulum Merdeka. Studi kasus kualitatif di SMP Muhammadiyah 7 Banyudono Program Khusus menggunakan lima wawancara bertanggal 6 Juni 2026 dengan kepala sekolah, guru PAI, dan tiga siswi kelas VIII, disertai lembar observasi kelas terisi serta catatan dokumentasi. Analisis dilakukan melalui kondensasi data, penyajian, dan verifikasi kesimpulan. Temuan menunjukkan penyesuaian metode dengan materi, perpaduan penjelasan guru dengan tanya jawab dan praktik, asesmen proses, serta dukungan supervisi dan diskusi bulanan guru. Partisipasi siswa beragam; kerja sama kelompok, waktu pelajaran, dan akses perangkat bersama masih menjadi kendala. Praktik fikih menghubungkan pemahaman dengan kemampuan melakukan, sedangkan kedekatan guru-siswa membuka ruang percakapan moral. Temuan tersebut mengindikasikan



	jalur menuju internalisasi nilai, tetapi belum membuktikan perubahan perilaku yang menetap. Artikel menawarkan model kontekstual yang menghubungkan empat dimensi pedagogis serta membahas relevansinya bagi keragaman lembaga pendidikan Islam Indonesia dengan mempertahankan identitas Muhammadiyah pada lokasi penelitian.
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INTRODUCTIONS

The rapid transformation of twenty-first-century education has fundamentally reshaped the way teaching and learning are conceptualized across diverse educational systems. Rather than emphasizing the transmission of knowledge from teachers to students, contemporary educational reforms increasingly advocate learning environments that promote critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, problem-solving, and lifelong learning. These changes are driven not only by technological advancement and the demands of Education 4.0 but also by a growing recognition that meaningful learning occurs when students actively construct knowledge through authentic experiences and social interaction. Consequently, educational success is no longer measured solely by students' ability to reproduce information but by their capacity to interpret knowledge critically, apply it to real-life situations, and continuously develop adaptive competencies. Recent systematic reviews and evidence syntheses consistently demonstrate that learner-centered pedagogies contribute to stronger student engagement, deeper conceptual understanding, higher-order thinking, and improved learning autonomy when compared with conventional teacher-centered approaches (Berg & Lepp, 2023; Bremner et al., 2022; Doolittle et al., 2023; González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022; Saleem et al., 2021). These developments indicate that the global educational agenda has shifted from delivering knowledge toward facilitating meaningful learning experiences capable of preparing students for increasingly complex social and intellectual challenges.

Within this global transformation, Student-Centered Learning (SCL) has emerged as one of the most influential pedagogical paradigms because it redefines learning as an active process in which students become agents of knowledge construction rather than passive recipients of information. The effectiveness of this approach, however, cannot be explained merely by the use of discussion methods, collaborative activities, or digital technologies. Instead, evidence from recent international studies suggests that successful learner-centered education depends on the coherent integration of instructional design, teacher facilitation, authentic assessment, and supportive learning environments that collectively encourage learner agency and sustained participation (Abdul Rahman et al., 2023; Kerimbayev et al., 2023; Mat & Jamaludin, 2024; Sukacké et al., 2022). Furthermore, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes that the implementation of Student-Centered Learning requires a fundamental transformation of pedagogical practice, whereby teachers redesign learning experiences, facilitate inquiry, and provide appropriate instructional scaffolding rather than functioning primarily as transmitters of knowledge (Ly, 2024; Zhai, 2025). These findings collectively suggest that Student-Centered Learning should be understood not simply as a classroom strategy but as a comprehensive pedagogical transformation that integrates curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher professionalism into a coherent educational system.

The global movement toward learner-centered education has also influenced educational reform in Indonesia through the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka. Rather than introducing curriculum change as a mere structural reform, Kurikulum Merdeka represents a pedagogical shift that encourages learning flexibility, differentiated instruction, authentic

assessment, project-based learning, and greater student participation throughout the instructional process. This orientation reflects the broader international movement advocating learner agency and meaningful learning by providing teachers with greater professional autonomy to design learning experiences that are responsive to students' characteristics and developmental needs. Emerging evidence from Indonesian educational settings indicates that the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka has encouraged more active classroom participation, strengthened instructional flexibility, and promoted competency-based learning. Nevertheless, successful implementation remains highly dependent on teachers' pedagogical competence, institutional support, and the ability to translate curriculum principles into authentic classroom practices (Amalia et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2025; Khair et al., 2026; Marlina et al., 2023; Prahastina et al., 2024; Putri et al., 2026). These findings suggest that curriculum reform alone is insufficient to transform classroom learning unless it is accompanied by substantive pedagogical transformation at both the teacher and school levels.

This pedagogical transformation becomes particularly significant within Islamic Religious Education (IRE), where learning objectives extend beyond academic achievement to encompass character formation, moral reasoning, and the internalization of Islamic values. Consequently, implementing Student-Centered Learning in IRE requires more than increasing classroom interaction or adopting active learning techniques; it requires learning experiences that enable students to critically understand religious concepts, reflect upon ethical issues, collaborate with peers, and apply Islamic teachings in authentic social contexts. Recent studies have highlighted that the successful implementation of learner-centered pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education depends on teachers' ability to integrate active learning, deep learning, authentic assessment, and value-based instruction into a coherent pedagogical framework (Gustina et al., 2025; Kaloko, 2025; Musanna & Duskri, 2025; Mustofa et al., 2023; Qodir et al., 2026; Tibr et al., 2025; Winata et al., 2024). Despite these developments, the existing literature continues to focus predominantly on curriculum implementation, instructional innovation, or assessment practices as separate areas of inquiry. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how instructional planning, teacher role transformation, authentic assessment, and institutional support interact as an integrated pedagogical system in shaping meaningful learning within Islamic Religious Education under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework.

The institutional setting also matters within Indonesia's diverse Islamic educational traditions. This study concerns a Muhammadiyah school, where the relationship between religious understanding, practical worship, and moral education must be interpreted within the school's own educational setting. Indonesian research on Islamic schools and madrasahs indicates that curriculum reform is mediated by institutional commitments and local practice (Amalia et al., 2024; Marlina et al., 2023). The case therefore offers a point of dialogue for other Islamic institutions, including pesantren and Aswaja An-Nahdliyah educational communities, about how learner participation can remain connected to adab, ethical responsibility, and religious learning. Such relevance is comparative and pedagogical; it does not imply that the participating school follows an NU curriculum or that practices are interchangeable across traditions.

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Although Student-Centered Learning has received considerable scholarly attention during the last decade, the existing body of literature demonstrates several distinct research trajectories rather than a unified understanding of its implementation. The first group of studies primarily

establishes the theoretical and empirical effectiveness of learner-centered pedagogy in improving student engagement, critical thinking, collaboration, self-directed learning, and meaningful learning across various educational settings. Systematic reviews and evidence syntheses consistently conclude that Student-Centered Learning positively influences learning quality when supported by coherent instructional design and active student participation (Berg & Lepp, 2023; Bremner et al., 2022; Mat & Jamaludin, 2024; Sukacké et al., 2022; Trullàs et al., 2022). Complementing these findings, theoretical and conceptual studies further argue that learner-centered education is grounded in constructivist principles, where knowledge is actively constructed through dialogue, collaboration, reflection, and authentic learning experiences rather than transmitted directly from teachers to learners (Doolittle et al., 2023; Saleem et al., 2021). Collectively, these studies provide robust evidence regarding the educational value of Student-Centered Learning; however, they predominantly examine its effectiveness across general educational contexts without addressing the unique pedagogical characteristics of Islamic Religious Education.

A second body of research has increasingly examined Student-Centered Learning within the context of curriculum reform and teacher professional transformation. These studies emphasize that successful learner-centered education depends not only on instructional strategies but also on teachers' ability to redesign learning experiences, facilitate inquiry, integrate digital technologies, and exercise greater pedagogical autonomy in response to changing educational demands (Aspandi & Muttaqin, 2025; Kerimbayev et al., 2023; Ly, 2024; Zhai, 2025). Parallel evidence from Indonesian studies further indicates that the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka has encouraged more flexible instructional practices, differentiated learning, authentic assessment, and stronger student participation across various educational institutions (Amalia et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2025; Khair et al., 2026; Marlina et al., 2023; Prahastina et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these investigations primarily evaluate curriculum implementation, teacher readiness, or educational policy, while providing relatively limited explanation of how these pedagogical components interact systematically within classroom practice.

The third research trajectory focuses specifically on Islamic Religious Education. Existing studies have demonstrated that the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in Islamic Religious Education has encouraged more active learning, authentic assessment, differentiated instruction, and stronger integration of character education. Other studies have also highlighted the growing importance of deep learning, reflective learning, and value internalization in strengthening students' religious understanding and character formation (Gustina et al., 2025; Kaloko, 2025; Musanna & Duskri, 2025; Mustofa et al., 2023; Putri et al., 2026; Qodir et al., 2026; Tibr et al., 2025; Winata et al., 2024). Despite these important contributions, previous studies generally investigate instructional planning, curriculum implementation, assessment, teacher competence, or classroom innovation as separate dimensions. Consequently, limited empirical attention has been given to understanding how instructional design, teacher role transformation, authentic assessment, and institutional support interact as an integrated pedagogical system that collectively shapes meaningful learning within Islamic Religious Education under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. This unresolved issue constitutes the principal research gap addressed by the present study.

The foregoing review indicates that existing studies have substantially advanced current understanding of Student-Centered Learning from multiple perspectives, including learner engagement, instructional innovation, curriculum implementation, teacher professional development, and meaningful learning. Nevertheless, the available evidence remains fragmented because these pedagogical dimensions are predominantly examined as independent variables rather than as interdependent components of a coherent educational system. Consequently, current scholarship provides limited empirical explanation of how instructional design, teacher role transformation, authentic assessment, and institutional support interact dynamically to facilitate meaningful learning within Islamic Religious

Education under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. Addressing this gap is particularly important because understanding the relationships among these pedagogical dimensions is essential for explaining why Student-Centered Learning succeeds in some educational contexts while remaining difficult to sustain in others.

Accordingly, the present study proposes a systemic perspective of Student-Centered Learning by examining how its implementation is shaped through the interaction of instructional planning, classroom pedagogy, authentic assessment, and institutional learning ecology in Islamic Religious Education. Rather than investigating these pedagogical components separately, this study conceptualizes them as mutually reinforcing dimensions that collectively influence the quality of meaningful learning. In doing so, the study contributes to the growing literature on learner-centered education by extending existing discussions beyond instructional strategies toward a more comprehensive understanding of pedagogical transformation within the context of Kurikulum Merdeka. This perspective also provides a conceptual foundation for interpreting Student-Centered Learning as an integrated pedagogical system that simultaneously supports cognitive development, character formation, and the internalization of Islamic values.

Based on this conceptual orientation, the present study aims to explore how Student-Centered Learning is implemented in Islamic Religious Education and Character Education at SMP Muhammadiyah 7 Banyudono Program Khusus under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. Specifically, the study seeks to analyse how instructional design, teacher role transformation, authentic assessment, and institutional support interact throughout the learning process and how these interactions contribute to meaningful learning experiences. By positioning Student-Centered Learning as a process of pedagogical transformation rather than merely a collection of active learning techniques, the study is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of learner-centered education, curriculum implementation, and pedagogical innovation within Islamic Religious Education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of how Student-Centered Learning (SCL) was implemented in Islamic Religious Education and Character Education under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework at SMP Muhammadiyah 7 Banyudono Program Khusus. A case study approach was selected because the research sought to examine pedagogical practices within their natural setting while considering the interactions among instructional planning, classroom implementation, authentic assessment, teacher roles, and contextual factors that shaped the learning process. Rather than measuring causal relationships or testing hypotheses, the study aimed to generate a comprehensive description of pedagogical practices and explain how Student-Centered Learning was enacted in an authentic educational context. This approach is consistent with qualitative inquiry, which emphasizes understanding social phenomena from participants' perspectives within real-life settings.

Research Setting and Participants

The case concerned Grade VIII Islamic Religious Education and Character Education at SMP Muhammadiyah 7 Banyudono Program Khusus, Boyolali, Central Java, in the 2025/2026 academic year. The research plan covered June–August 2026; the five interview records used here are dated 6 June 2026. Purposive selection was based on direct involvement in the case: the PAI teacher (T1) planned, taught, and assessed the lessons; the principal (P1) was responsible for curriculum support and school supervision; and three female Grade VIII students (S1–S3) had personally experienced these lessons. The principal, rather than an unspecified principal or curriculum deputy, was interviewed. These role-based criteria

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provided perspectives on planning, school support, and learner experience. Years of employment and minimum exposure thresholds were not recorded and are not used retrospectively as eligibility criteria.

Data Collection

The evidence included five individual semi-structured interview records: one principal interview with five question-answer units, one teacher interview with twelve, and three student interviews with seven units each. Interviews addressed planning, learning activities, assessment, resources, participation, and difficulties. One completed Grade VIII PAI observation form recorded classroom participation, teacher clarification, assessment activities, equipment use, and time constraints. Its numeric date is 6 June 2026; no start or finish time is recorded, so cumulative observation hours cannot be reported. A separate blank observation guide was treated as an instrument, not as additional field evidence. Documentation comprised the school profile and a completed inventory recording teaching modules, learning outcomes, learning objective pathways, assessment sheets, discussion worksheets, and visual records. The inventory establishes the recorded availability of these materials; it does not independently substantiate every assessment technique attributed to the school in the broader narrative.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Analysis followed data condensation, display, and conclusion verification (Miles et al., 2018). Interview responses and observation notes were compared under four categories: instructional planning, classroom implementation, assessment, and institutional conditions. Role codes identify quotations; numbered questions identify their position within each interview. Indonesian quotations were translated into English for reporting. Source comparison retained disagreements as well as convergence: students valued explanation and questioning but also described unequal participation, limited cooperation, and unfinished questions. Documentary records were used to contextualize these accounts rather than to infer unrecorded practices. This approach provides a transparent basis for interpretation without claiming saturation, representative sampling, or a causal estimate of SCL effectiveness.



RESEARCH RESULT

Planning Student-Centered Learning

The documentation inventory recorded a teaching module, learning outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran), and learning objective pathways (Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran). The teacher described selecting methods according to the topic rather than applying one activity to every lesson. This supports an interpretation of planning as subject-sensitive design. The available documents and interviews do not establish that every lesson used project-based inquiry or that all planned activities were implemented uniformly.

The teacher explained, "I adapt it to the material, and choose the method that seems suitable for that material" (T1, Q1). He also described the additional preparation needed before class (T1, Q7). Planning therefore involved anticipating how learners could access different kinds of religious content, rather than simply replacing explanation with group work.

The relationship between planning and implementation is illustrated by the distinctions among history, Aqidah, and Fiqh. Videos supported historical topics; questioning and motivational explanation supported Aqidah; and demonstration followed by student practice supported Fiqh. These choices connected instructional form to the knowledge and practice required by the topic.

Classroom Implementation

The completed observation form described more active responses when the teacher used opening questions, while noting that enthusiasm was uneven. It also recorded variation in methods and participation, including a small number of less active students. These notes support an account of differentiated participation rather than universal engagement.

The teacher described a mixed repertoire: "For history, I sometimes show a video and explain parts of it; for Aqidah, I use questions and motivational explanation; for Fiqh, I demonstrate first, and then the students practise and I assess them" (T1, Q2). Games and quizzes were additional options. Teacher explanation remained part of SCL, particularly when learners needed clarification.

Student accounts qualify a simple narrative of a complete shift away from teacher direction. S1 valued the teacher's detailed explanation and the opportunity to ask questions (S1, Q1), but added that "usually it is the same students who ask" (S1, Q3). S2 described ordinary rather than consistently high interest in PAI (S2, Q1). S3 confirmed that activities differed by topic (S3, Q1). Together, these accounts show opportunities for agency whose uptake varied among learners.

The observation form recorded the teacher adding explanations during videos when necessary content had not been covered. Teacher guidance thus connected media use to the intended religious understanding. The evidence supports facilitation combined with explanation; it does not support the claim that students independently validated all religious knowledge.

Authentic Assessment

The teacher reported assessing participation, practical tasks, group tasks, and group projects (T1, Q5). The observation form also recorded daily individual work, practical activities, and group assignments as assessment sources. The documentation inventory listed assessment sheets and discussion worksheets. These sources support a process-oriented and performance-based component of assessment alongside classroom instruction.

Although the broader research narrative mentioned portfolios and peer assessment, the interview answer and completed observation form did not independently establish routine use of these specific techniques. Nor did the teacher's affirmative opening to a question about reflection provide a detailed example of systematic self-assessment. The findings are therefore limited to the assessment forms explicitly described.

Practical assessment provided a direct connection between learning about worship and demonstrating the relevant procedure. Participation and group tasks offered opportunities to notice responsibility and interaction. However, there were no longitudinal attitude records or repeated observations outside lessons from which stable moral change could be established. Classroom performance is consequently interpreted as evidence of enactment within the learning setting, not proof of durable value internalization.

Supporting and Constraining Factors

The principal reported that the school did not operate a separate SCL-specific policy; Kurikulum Merdeka provided the broader orientation toward active learning (P1, Q1). Supervision involved visits to classrooms and attention to teacher–student interaction. Monthly teacher evaluation meetings included discussion of suitable methods, whereas externally facilitated workshops were occasional (P1, Q2–Q4). Institutional support was thus grounded in regular local reflection and available facilities rather than a documented specialist SCL programme.

Facilities included televisions, projectors, a computer laboratory, microphones, and sound equipment. The teacher valued these resources while restricting off-topic viewing when it distracted from instruction (T1, Q4 and Q8). The observation record also noted that classes sometimes had to queue for equipment. Availability and access were therefore distinct conditions: equipment existed, but timely access was not assured.

The students reported different constraints. S1 disliked memorizing prayers (S1, Q6); S2 stated, “Sometimes a group member does not want to cooperate” (S2, Q6), and described lesson time ending before she could ask a question (S2, Q7). S3 disliked retelling historical material (S3, Q6). S1 and S3 considered the workload manageable. These differences suggest that enjoyment and task demands depended on the learner and the activity.

The teacher described postponing unfinished discussion to another meeting and sometimes using break time (T1, Q10 and Q12). These were reported adaptations, not evidence that time constraints had been resolved. Moving substantive inquiry to a later lesson and coordinating equipment bookings would address these constraints more structurally while protecting students’ rest periods. Such measures are recommendations arising from the case, rather than evaluated interventions.

DISCUSSION

Instructional Design as the Foundation of Student-Centered Learning

The case suggests that instructional planning connected curriculum aims with a varied repertoire of activities. Its significance lies in the suitability of an activity for its topic: practical Fiqh required demonstration and rehearsal, whereas other topics allowed questions, discussion, or video-supported explanation. The study did not compare achievement across methods; it therefore identifies a plausible design relationship rather than establishing instructional effectiveness.

This interpretation reinforces the constructivist assumption that meaningful learning emerges when teachers intentionally create learning environments in which students actively construct knowledge through exploration, dialogue, and reflection rather than passively receiving information. Within this perspective, instructional planning serves as the pedagogical architecture that enables learner agency because it organizes learning objectives, classroom activities, and assessment into a coherent learning system. Previous studies have consistently reported that learner-centered instructional design contributes to stronger student engagement, autonomous learning, collaborative competence, and higher-order thinking when classroom activities are intentionally aligned with curriculum objectives rather than implemented as isolated teaching strategies (Saleem et al., 2021; Bremner et al., 2022; Kerimbayev et al., 2023). Likewise, systematic evidence synthesized by González-Pérez and

Ramírez-Montoya (2022) and Doolittle et al. (2023) emphasizes that active learning becomes educationally meaningful only when supported by instructional designs that deliberately promote inquiry, participation, and reflective learning processes. Consequently, the present findings provide empirical support for the growing international consensus that successful learner-centered education begins with pedagogical design rather than classroom improvisation.

Within IRE, the relevant distinction is between understanding a religious teaching and opportunities to enact it. Planning can connect a Fiqh explanation to practice and feedback, or a moral topic to discussion of reasons and conduct. The evidence here supports such opportunities, but it does not demonstrate comprehensive cognitive, moral, and spiritual development. This bounded interpretation makes the link to value-based learning more specific while remaining consistent with contemporary discussions of IRE (Gustina et al., 2025; Musanna & Duskri, 2025; Qodir et al., 2026).

The implications of these findings extend beyond classroom practice. They suggest that improving the quality of Student-Centered Learning cannot rely solely on teachers' creativity during instruction but requires systematic support for teachers' pedagogical design competence. Curriculum reform initiatives such as Kurikulum Merdeka therefore need to be accompanied by sustained professional development that strengthens teachers' capacity to design coherent learner-centered instruction aligned with curriculum goals, authentic assessment, and students' developmental characteristics. Viewed from this perspective, instructional planning represents the first stage of pedagogical transformation because it determines how learner agency, meaningful learning, and authentic participation are translated from curriculum policy into everyday classroom practice. This interpretation constitutes an important contribution of the present study by positioning instructional design as the primary mechanism through which Student-Centered Learning is operationalized within Islamic Religious Education under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework.

Teacher Role Transformation as the Core Mechanism of Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Teacher role transformation was partial and situational. T1 elicited questions and organized practice while continuing to explain and clarify. The students' appreciation of explanation indicates that agency and instructional guidance need not be opposites. A learner-centered interpretation is warranted where teacher decisions enable participation and understanding, but not merely because a classroom uses digital media or changes activities.

These findings reinforce a growing body of international scholarship arguing that the defining characteristic of learner-centered education lies in the transformation of teachers' professional identities rather than in the application of specific teaching techniques. Contemporary studies increasingly describe teachers as instructional designers, facilitators, mentors, learning coaches, and providers of scaffolding who create learning environments that promote learner autonomy and collaborative knowledge construction (Ly, 2024; Zhai, 2025). Similarly, systematic reviews have demonstrated that active learning becomes sustainable only when teachers intentionally regulate classroom interaction, provide appropriate cognitive support, and gradually transfer learning responsibility to students (Kerimbayev et al., 2023; Bremner et al., 2022). Doolittle et al. (2023) further argue that learner-centered pedagogy should be understood as an instructional process requiring continuous facilitation of inquiry, reflection, and dialogue rather than simply increasing classroom activity. The present findings therefore strengthen existing evidence by illustrating how teacher role transformation becomes the principal mechanism through which Student-Centered Learning is translated into authentic classroom practice.

The most direct evidence concerning moral formation was relational. Asked about internalizing religious values, T1 described talking with students so that "we become close and

our hearts connect,” adding that some students then shared personal experiences (T1, Q6). This account suggests that accessibility and trust created opportunities for moral conversation. It is a teacher-reported mechanism of openness, not independent evidence that particular behaviours changed. The students’ brief affirmative responses about understanding and practising moral values attributed the benefit mainly to clear explanation (S1–S3, Q4), which also qualifies an exclusively activity-driven explanation.

The findings also carry important implications for teacher professional development within the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka. If learner-centered education depends primarily on teachers’ capacity to redesign their professional roles, then educational reform should prioritize strengthening teachers’ pedagogical competence rather than merely introducing new instructional models or classroom technologies. Professional learning initiatives should therefore focus on developing teachers’ expertise in facilitating dialogue, providing instructional scaffolding, managing collaborative learning, and integrating authentic religious experiences into classroom instruction. Viewed from this perspective, teacher role transformation represents the operational core of pedagogical transformation because it bridges curriculum intentions, instructional planning, classroom interaction, and meaningful learning outcomes. Accordingly, the present study contributes to the growing discourse on Student-Centered Learning by demonstrating that sustainable pedagogical transformation within Islamic Religious Education is fundamentally driven by teachers’ evolving professional roles rather than by the isolated adoption of active learning strategies.

Authentic Assessment as an Integral Component of Meaningful Learning

Authentic assessment in this case was most clearly evidenced by practical performance, daily work, and group assignments. These forms allowed the teacher to attend to how knowledge was used during learning. A practical demonstration can show that a learner can perform a procedure at that moment; it cannot establish that the learner performs it independently and consistently in daily life. Similarly, group participation offers evidence about conduct within a task, while persistent moral dispositions require repeated and contextualized evidence.

This interpretation is consistent with contemporary perspectives on authentic assessment, which argue that assessment should provide evidence of how students construct, apply, and reflect upon knowledge in meaningful learning situations rather than simply evaluate their ability to recall information. Within learner-centered pedagogy, assessment is expected to become an ongoing learning process that supports feedback, self-regulation, and continuous improvement (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022). Likewise, recent systematic reviews emphasize that meaningful learning environments require close alignment between instructional design, classroom interaction, and assessment because students are more likely to develop higher-order thinking and sustained engagement when evaluation focuses on authentic performance rather than isolated test scores (Kerimbayev et al., 2023; Bremner et al., 2022). Doolittle et al. (2023) further contend that active learning cannot be sustained unless assessment practices recognize students’ active participation throughout the learning process. The present findings therefore reinforce growing international evidence that authentic assessment constitutes a fundamental component of learner-centered education rather than a complementary instructional practice.

A useful interpretation is a pathway from understanding, through supported enactment, to reflection and possible habituation. Clear explanation and questioning support understanding; Fiqh practice and group tasks provide enactment opportunities; and personal conversation permits reflection. The last step, sustained habituation beyond class, remains a proposition for further study. S2’s account of non-cooperation and S1’s observation that the same students asked questions show why active methods alone cannot be treated as proof that responsibility or inclusive dialogue has been internalized.

The practical implications of these findings are substantial for the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka. If learner-centered pedagogy aims to encourage active participation, collaborative inquiry, and meaningful learning, assessment systems should likewise recognize these dimensions through diverse and process-oriented evaluation strategies. Consequently, strengthening Student-Centered Learning requires schools to support teachers in developing authentic assessment literacy alongside instructional competence. Professional development initiatives should therefore emphasize the integration of assessment planning with instructional design so that evaluation becomes an inseparable part of the learning process rather than an administrative requirement conducted at the end of instruction. Viewed from this perspective, authentic assessment serves as the mechanism that maintains coherence between curriculum objectives, learner-centered instruction, and meaningful learning outcomes. This study therefore argues that pedagogical transformation within Islamic Religious Education cannot be fully realized unless assessment practices evolve in parallel with changes in instructional design and classroom interaction.

Pedagogical Transformation as a Systemic Process: The Role of Institutional Support and Learning Ecology

Institutional support linked classroom practice to supervision, monthly discussion among teachers, and shared resources. These arrangements supplied conditions for adaptation, but equipment queues and unfinished questions showed limits to implementation. The interaction among planning, facilitation, assessment, and support is therefore best understood as a context-dependent account of practice rather than a validated model of successful transformation.

This interpretation aligns with contemporary perspectives on educational change, which argue that sustainable pedagogical innovation rarely depends on individual teachers alone but instead develops within supportive institutional ecosystems. Recent studies have emphasized that curriculum reform becomes effective when accompanied by coherent school leadership, teacher professional learning, instructional autonomy, and organizational cultures that encourage experimentation and reflective practice (Zhai, 2025; Ly, 2024). Likewise, research on learner-centered education consistently demonstrates that active learning is more likely to be sustained when schools provide structural support enabling teachers to redesign instruction, implement authentic assessment, and respond flexibly to students' diverse learning needs (Kerimbayev et al., 2023; Bremner et al., 2022; González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022). Consequently, the present findings reinforce the view that pedagogical transformation represents a collective institutional endeavour rather than an individual instructional responsibility.

The evidence also cautions against equating curriculum adoption with pedagogical uniformity. Teacher explanations remained important, students differed in interest, and some group members did not cooperate. Structural recommendations include shared resource scheduling, manageable inquiry tasks across lessons, and participation routines that make space for quieter students. Religious education adds a further requirement: assessment should distinguish knowledge, practical competence, and sustained moral conduct instead of treating them as equivalent indicators.

Figure 1 summarizes the four dimensions as a conceptual interpretation of the case. Planning sets tasks and goals; facilitation supports access and participation; assessment provides information on demonstrated learning; and institutional arrangements enable or constrain these processes. Connections to Islamic values are mediated by practical enactment, relational trust, and reflection. The model proposes relationships for later examination and does not represent tested causal pathways or proven long-term character outcomes.

For Aswaja An-Nahdliyah and pesantren educators, the comparative question is how these arrangements might support adab in discussion, mutual responsibility, and thoughtful

religious practice within their own traditions. The reported non-cooperation is particularly useful as a diagnostic example: assigning group work does not itself guarantee ethical interaction. Explicit expectations, teacher modelling, and feedback would need to accompany the activity. The Muhammadiyah setting remains analytically distinct; the study neither documents Aswaja instruction at this school nor makes a comparison of outcomes between Muhammadiyah and NU institutions.

The principal limitations are the single-school design, three student perspectives, and a limited recorded observation corpus. Interview duration, staff tenure, and cumulative observation hours were not documented. Student answers to the question about moral understanding were brief and elicited by a positively framed question; they should not be interpreted as an independent measure of internalization. Subsequent research should use neutral prompts, repeated observations, and concrete examples of conduct across settings to examine whether classroom learning becomes sustained practice.

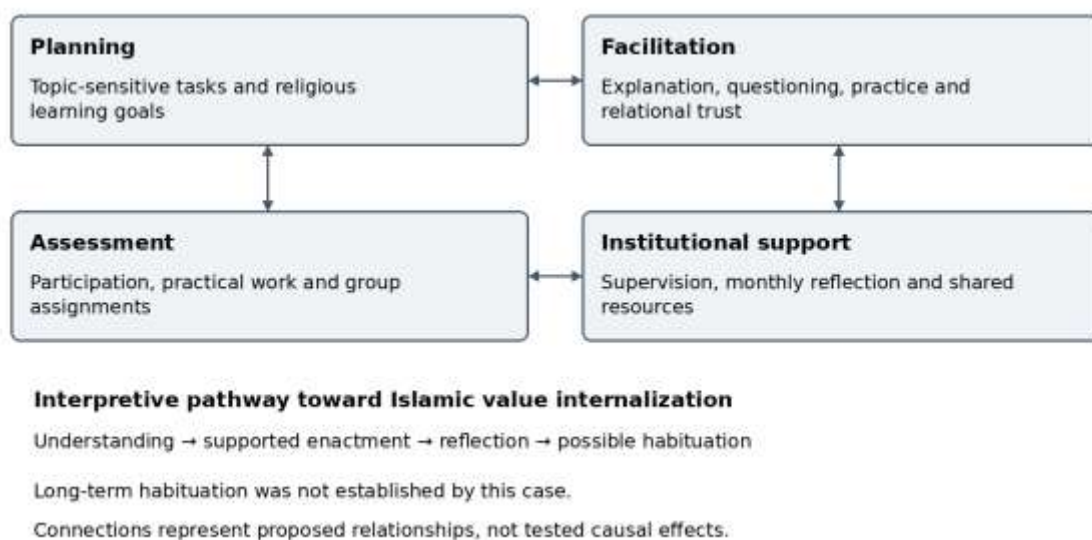


Figure 1. Conceptual interpretation of pedagogical transformation in SCL for IRE

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This qualitative case identified four connected dimensions of SCL in IRE: topic-sensitive planning, teacher facilitation combined with explanation, practical and process-oriented assessment, and institutional support. Five interviews, a completed observation record, and documentation records showed how these dimensions operated together, while also revealing unequal participation, difficulties with group cooperation, time constraints, and competition for equipment.

The study's contribution is a contextual account of how these dimensions may create opportunities for religious learning. Fiqh practice linked understanding to performance; opportunities to ask questions supported clarification; and approachable teacher-student relationships enabled personal moral conversation. These mechanisms suggest pathways toward Islamic value internalization. They do not establish durable changes in religious conduct, and the conceptual model should be examined through repeated observations and comparative research.

For teachers, the findings support aligning religious learning goals with suitable tasks, maintaining clear explanation and feedback, and assessing demonstrated practice separately from longer-term character formation. For school leaders, monthly professional reflection, coordinated resource access, and protected follow-up lesson time offer practical points for

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improvement. The case can inform dialogue with other Indonesian Islamic institutions, including pesantren and NU-affiliated schools, provided adaptation respects each institution's educational tradition and is evaluated in its own setting.

ETHICS STATEMENT & AUTHOR'S ROLE

Pernyataan Etika & Peran Penulis (CRediT Statement)

Penulis Satu (Almas Dzakiyyah): Konseptualisasi, Metodologi, Penulisan – draf asli.

Penulis Dua (Muhammad Ja'far Nashir): Kurasi data, Validasi.

Kebijakan Data

Data yang mendukung temuan penelitian ini tersedia dari penulis korespondensi berdasarkan permintaan yang wajar.

Persetujuan Etik

Penelitian ini telah disetujui oleh Komite Etik IIM Surakarta dan mematuhi standar etika penelitian pada manusia.

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