Enhancing the Learning Experience through Spiritual Growth in the Merdeka Curriculum at Islamic Educational Institution

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to describe efforts to improve student learning experiences based on spiritual growth in the independent curriculum at MI Zainul Anwar. This research was conducted with a qualitative approach with a descriptive type. The data collection technique used was interviews with the Head of Madrasah, Deputy Head of Curriculum, and two subject teachers, as well as documentation. Data analysis was carried out through three interactive steps, namely: (1) data condensation; (2) data exposure; and (3) drawing conclusions and verification. Data validity with source triangulation process. The results of the study explained that P5 namely self-potential development, self-empowerment, self-understanding, self-improvement, and students' social roles as a process of spiritual growth in the independent curriculum to improve student learning experiences that are tailored to student needs and increase learning experiences that will not be achieved through exposure purely verbal. So that learning experience was obtained and obtained through various learning activities as mentioned above. The subject matter functions more as a tool (means) not a goal (ends). Spiritual growth which was used as an approach in this independent curriculum illustrates various activities that are not only based on religious values but also uphold the affective aspects that students should have.

Key Words: *Learning Experience, Spiritual Growth, Independent Curriculum*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic education is experiencing a significant paradigm shift, especially with the introduction of the Independent Curriculum. One main focus in developing this curriculum is improving learning experiences based on spiritual growth. In this context, spiritual growth is considered an addition to academic aspects and the core that shapes students' character and identity. The Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic educational institutions marks a breakthrough in integrating spiritual values into learning. Education based on spiritual growth aims to form a generation that is not only academically intelligent but also has wisdom, mental resilience and high morality to Islamic teachings.

The importance of learning experiences based on spiritual growth is reflected in changes in learning materials and in the teaching approaches applied by educators. Teachers in Islamic educational institutions are now expected to be transmitters of information and facilitators of students' spiritual growth. The learning process teaches religious concepts and involves students in direct experience, reflection, and application of Islamic values in everyday life. In this research, we will explore various aspects of increasing spiritual growth-based learning experiences in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic educational institutions. Through this approach, it is hoped to produce a deeper understanding of the impact of this curriculum on students' spiritual development. Empowering students to integrate Islamic values in their decision-making, social interactions, and daily actions will be the main focus of this research. Thus, this research looks at the impact on academic abilities and how spiritual growth-based learning experiences can shape students' character and personality. Through a better understanding of this, it is hoped that it can positively contribute to the development of the curriculum and practice of Islamic education more broadly.

Learning experiences are learning activities that students must carry out to master competency standards, fundamental abilities and learning materials (Fauzi et al., 2023). This experiential approach provides authentic learning to students by instilling student competency values (Muljawan & Ibad, 2020). According to Hoover (in Pratama et al., 2019), experience-based learning is the form of an individual who can engage cognitively effectively and act to process knowledge, skills and attitudes in a learning situation, which is categorized as active involvement at a high level of interaction. Siregar (2017) stated that it is essential to develop learning experiences because they become a reference for students to understand and master the learning material presented by the teacher and the realization of the curriculum used. Meanwhile, Jafri (2021) stated, "Learning from experience is much better than just talking, never doing anything at all. The experience referred to here is, of course, an educational experience. Providing educational experiences to students is directed at achieving the goals set."

It is hoped that the current curriculum changes will overcome various educational problems the Indonesian nation faces. The decline and backwardness due to the Covid 19 pandemic could impact the nation's collapse because human resources play a vital role in a country with an abundant demographic bonus like Indonesia (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022). One of the right ways to improve the quality of human resources is to improve the quality of education. So, in its implementation, the synchronization of learning methods, materials, and media with teacher delivery in the classroom must be adjusted to the formulation of student needs and characteristics (Achmad et al., 2022).

The characteristics and needs of students amid current globalization and digitalization require experience, enthusiasm and learning motivation that is

virtuous and civilized (Lase, 2018). Niqresh (2019), in his research, explained that the current development of modernization in the world of education is aimed at transforming the classical education style into a heterogeneous one for current developments, and he also hopes that it will not damage or reduce students' affective values. According to Raja and Nagasubramani (2018), it is necessary to observe together that the characteristics and needs of students must be identified along with the current world of digitalization. Students can interact with various types of environments, using language, clothing, and body movements that are currently trendy.

Unfortunately, nowadays, there is a crisis of affective values among students because the need for meaning in life is not fulfilled. Hence, life feels shallow, empty, and identical to the behaviour of the surrounding environment. Evidence can be seen from the researchers' observations on the condition of MI Zainul Anwar students. Three reasons have hampered students' affective aspects since implementing social distancing. First, students must develop some parts (potential and talents) of themselves. Second, it has developed several parts, but not proportionally. Third, it is contrary to civilized norms. This is proof that students are capable of potential, but rather, there is a lack of need for more mucus to stimulate their development. The presence of teachers also pays less attention to students because of limited space and time for extensive interaction with students.

This problem was then initiated into a new curriculum policy during the new average period. The Ministry of Education and Culture launched a new curriculum as a recovery measure for the previous curriculum (emergency curriculum), which was used during the pandemic and caused a degradation of moral and affective values in the reality of students' lives. This curriculum is then presented to open space freely for institutions or teachers to adapt learning concepts to the needs/characteristics of students. This is also what MI Zainul Anwar implemented at the beginning of 2022. TMI Zainul Anwar involved spiritual growth in the independent curriculum used to emphasize developing students' learning experiences after experiencing passive learning during the pandemic; with this approach, students are allowed to gain learning experiences that can foster noble spiritual values by religious norms and Pancasila, both individually and in groups.

The spiritual character should not only be a target for achievement at the end of a student's graduation but must also be embedded since the student is in school. The relationship between students and teachers must also be based on spiritual character both in and outside the classroom (Fahyuni et al., 2020). This innovation allows students to develop and educate intensively to create a good, friendly, robust and responsible temperament with noble morals to control themselves in everyday life (Fatima et al., 2020). In the SQ (spiritual quotient) theory, spiritual intelligence is needed as a person's ability to give meaning to worship for every behaviour and activity through monotheistic (integralistic)

steps and thinking, and with the principle "only because of God" (Oktapiani, 2020). For a student, by growing and developing spiritual intelligence, he can make himself a human being who has the same rights, obligations, position and responsibilities, is confident in his abilities, and is brave in his actions. Practically, MI Zainul Anwar uses this approach as part of implementing the independent curriculum for students.

The Merdeka Curriculum has diverse extracurricular learning where the content will be more optimal, giving students enough time to deepen concepts and strengthen competencies. Rifa'i et al. (2022) stated that properly implementing the independent curriculum in PAI subjects will make it easier for teachers to teach students essential and vital material without burdening them with other less essential material. The extensive PAI subject matter will be narrowed down into several parts, which must be delivered to students with independence, fun, in-depth, and on-target learning. In his research, Qolbiyah (2022) explains that implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum is very suitable for PAI subjects because learning is carried out in stages and continuously from one phase to another. PAI must be delivered gradually and thoroughly, starting from the essential things, namely cultivating strong beliefs and then moving on to other areas. Meanwhile, Susilowati (2022) stated more firmly that the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum occupies a superior learning concept explained by the Ministry of Education and Culture, which focuses on essential material and developing student competencies in each phase so that students can learn more deeply, meaningfully and happily, without being rushed. Learning is much more relevant and interactive through project activities, which provide wider opportunities for students to actively explore actual issues such as environmental issues, health and others to support the development of character and competency profiles of Pancasila Students.

Several summaries of the results of previous studies regarding the implementation of the independent curriculum have been carried out before, as shown above. However, this research shows a different side to implementing the independent curriculum in general, emphasizing the collaborative aspect of students as spirits who always need to hone and develop their spiritual abilities. It is a novelty that this research requires the importance of the relationship between aspects of student competence (cognitive and affective aspects) to build interaction while studying at a madrasa. The selection of research objects or locations is interesting, considering that MI Zainul Anwar is one of the Islamic educational institutions that emphasizes developing students' physical and spiritual competencies.

The novelty of this research explains that the conditions of students' learning experiences need to be considered every day. The existence and use of the curriculum can help teachers and madrasahs create authentic learning experiences based on spiritual habitation. The researcher took the focus of the research as a step to improve students' learning experiences based on the growth

of spiritual values in implementing the independent curriculum. So, this research aims to determine the forms or efforts of MI Zainul Anwar to improve students' learning experiences based on spiritual growth in the independent curriculum.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative case study type method by conducting research that aims to describe the problem and analyze the problems that occur. Researchers collected data through several stages, such as observation and direct observation at the research site. Interview interviewing several informants at the research location. Observation, visiting the research site. Documentation study, analyzing documents related to research. The research was conducted at the MI Zainul Anwar institution, Alassamur Kulon, Kraksaan, Probolinggo, East Java, Indonesia. Accuracy data was obtained from several informants who could inform and describe events in the field. Several informants who provided an overview of field conditions can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informants

No	Informant	Total	Initials
1	Head master	1	RT
2	Deputy Head of Madrasah	1	I
3	Teacher	10	E,H,L,S,SQ,M,N,P,Y,V,T,

It can be seen in the table above that the source of information was received from five informants, including the head of the Ibtidaiyah madrasah, then the deputy head of the Ibtidaiyah madrasah, and finally, the teachers as supervisors. The data analysis technique refers to the theories of Miles, Huberman and Saldana, which is carried out with an initial data collection process through observation, interviews and documentation. The second step in data condensation is selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming. The third step is presenting the data, which means some of the information is arranged, allowing the possibility of a conclusion. The fourth step is concluding or verifying the data studied by re-checking it with evidence found in the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To achieve lesson objectives, educational institutions must first identify needs. Once the needs are identified, it is also necessary to specify the objectives to be achieved because the lessons for students' education are significant (Stranovská et al., 2019). Educational objectives can be formulated in general and specifically. To determine the material, it is also necessary to pay attention to the validity and contribution of the selected material. The material must produce a learning experience (Perrotta & Bohan, 2019). Therefore, the curriculum helps underlie and direct the implementation of educational programs and teaching

methods, and subject matter alone is not enough; it must reach further than that, namely learning experiences (Marisa, 2021). According to Tylor (in Lase, 2018), "learning experience is a history of activities obtained and experienced by students as a result of learning and interaction with learning content and activities.

MI Zainul Anwar uses a spiritual growth approach in the independent curriculum to improve student learning experiences. Based on researchers' observations, five main aspects of development are prioritized in the independent curriculum used by MI Zainul Anwar, namely P5 development, including self-potential, self-empowerment, self-improvement, self-understanding and social roles.

Figure 1. Important aspects of the Independent Curriculum based on Spiritual Growth

The process of developing spiritual growth-based learning experiences in the independent curriculum by MI Zainul Anwar is based on two main Islamic concepts in life (hablun min Allah - relationship with Allah and hablun min Annas - relationship with others). These five aspects are intended to be developed to help cognitive abilities work well and maintain affective abilities. To see the explanation in more detail, below are the results of the researcher's observations regarding increasing spiritual growth-based learning experiences in the independent curriculum.

Development of Personal Potential

The first thing in determining or implementing the curriculum is identifying students' abilities and level of spiritual intelligence by testing their

potential. MI Zainul Anwar uses psychological tests for each new student to identify their abilities and competencies before determining which class suits them. Researchers looked at the psychological tests that madrasas made for students by providing leaflets with forms to fill in personal identities, such as the students' likes, hobbies, ideals, and abilities. Student answers will be recorded as a record for the madrasah to know the student's potential and characteristics. The opinion of Sulaiman Neviyarni (2021) explains that with personality (psychological) tests, individuals can find out their tendencies. All potential and types of student personality, such as physical potential (Phychomotoric), mental potential, intellectual (intellectual quotient), social, emotional potential (Emotional Quotient), spiritual, mental potential (Spiritual Quotient), and fighting potential (adversity quotient) will be measured from the test this psychology.

Furthermore, after carrying out psychological tests, students can be grouped. Then, there are several tips from madrasas for teachers to easily recognize students' potential holistically in the classroom. (1) Teachers are instructed to identify the activities students like or dislike most during learning. (2) Recognize what students need for the material studied more quickly. (3) Asking the people closest to the students (parents) what would best be able to accompany the students' learning. Madrasas implement a community group system for each class. The association participants for each class are formed in a WhatsApp group forum, which is attended by the class teacher, all teachers who have teaching hours, and all the parents of students in that class. Total class: So whatever form of information regarding the madrasa and student learning is conveyed clearly and openly. (3) allow students to choose. Teachers allow students to choose their interests and talents. Teachers also allow students to be creative in determining their way of thinking. (4) Provoke students' curiosity in each subject. The teacher presents material related to history, past events, or everyday life, for example, in studying SKI (history of Islamic culture), which requires students to get to know Kholifatur Rosyidin with so many historical life stories and patterns of government. The SKI subject teacher explained that he presented learning material by connecting one story to another. For example, if the LKS (student worksheet) only presents the way of government of the Rosyidin Kholifatur with a series of lots of descriptions so that students are bored and lazy to read, then the SKI teacher applies a more complex history, such as "Do you know which of the Rosyidin Kholifatur was the Prophet's father-in-law? SAW.?" or "Do you know which of the Kholifatur Rosyidin became the Prophet's son-in-law?" This question aroused students' interest in knowing more about Kholifatur Rosyidin, who was still part of the family of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Teachers will more easily recognize and identify students continuously and intensely from these efforts to develop students' potential.

The efforts made by MI Zainul Anwar are similar to the focus of the independent curriculum. The focus of freedom to learn is freedom to think

creatively and independently. Teachers are the driving force behind actions that bring positive things to students. The reorganization was done to respond to changes and progress within the country and adapt to changing times. Thus, students develop according to their potential and abilities. Independent learning from the independent learning curriculum is characterized as critical, high quality, fast, applicable, expressive, progressive and diverse. Students learn on their initiative, as seen by their attitudes and thinking. One is energetic, optimistic, positive, creative and not worried about trying new things.

Development of Self-Empowerment

Self-empowerment can be interpreted as a situation where someone consciously decides to become independent, have self-confidence, and continue to develop themselves in a better direction. The institutional culture researchers found at MI Zainul Anwar was the attachment of the motto "Ha Ana Dza" (this is who I am) to students. This motto is always said by students when the teacher checks their presence to answer "present" or when they want to answer questions from the teacher or other students. This motto is proposed so that students can appreciate, respect, care for, and equalize their rights, obligations, and positions among students. This motto also enables students to be confident and brave in their abilities without being isolated or discriminated against.

The head of the madrasah also added, "Teachers' tips for developing students' self-empowerment are always saying thank you, please and sorry to students. "This is intended to be a role model for students and to respect students' existence at the madrasa." Huda (2017) explains that students' self-empowerment does not only appear in those who uphold the values of self-confidence or courage, but teachers must also provide active and regulatory stimuli to students, such as motivation and full support for students' self-abilities. So it is clear that this self-empowerment can be a form of developing a form of hablum min Allah (relationship with Allah) with gratitude for the blessings of God's gift of life to them.

Development of Self-Understanding

Developing students' self-understanding, especially regarding subject matter, must align with a teacher's duties and roles. MI Zainul Anwar demonstrated to the teacher council how to use interactive methods such as project-based learning (PjBL). This learning model is one of the other models that hone students' thinking and analytical skills. Besides that, MI Zainul Anwar also suggested that students' learning materials be assisted using projector media, which is already available in madrasas. To understand LKS (student worksheets), students must have a highlighter or pen to underline the crucial points of the material presented by the teacher. This effort is made so students can easily find and recognize important information from the material.

To evaluate and measure students' level of understanding, teachers require students to prepare mind maps for each material presented by the teacher. Mind mapping, initiated by MI Zainul Anwar, encourages students to think creatively and analyze their memories. Teachers can identify the level and grouping of students' abilities from this effort. Remember that during learning, the teacher does ask (open questions) so that students and teachers can exchange thoughts and opinions regarding material that is difficult to understand or problems that occur. According to Juniar et al. (2019), making mind maps can measure students' understanding of a subject matter. Silva et al. (2022) stated that this creative note-taking method makes it easier for students to remember much information. Once completed, the notes taken form a pattern of interrelated ideas. The Indonesian language subject teacher explained that the teacher must continue to pay attention to the students' every movement and ask them about their understanding of the material before doing mind mapping. This is intended so that students gain equal understanding and can always actively pay attention to the teacher's material.

Self-Improvement Development

The development of student self-improvement is carried out by evaluating student learning outcomes at each meeting. Mind mapping is a form of continuous reflection and formative evaluation of students. Apart from conducting evaluations, teachers are intelligent and correct in appreciating students' learning performance and outcomes, giving each student confidence that they have the same rights and obligations, and inviting each other to evaluate themselves and their friends. The SKI subject teacher explained, "When the teacher has given students time to make a mind map, the teacher demands students to correct their friends' mind maps randomly. That way, work corrections between students can be seen together and can be used as a self-evaluation of those who do not remember the material that has been presented. This creates concepts and learning experiences while muhasabah (self-introspection). This process of self-correction between students is made by teachers so that they continuously evaluate their abilities.

Social Role Development

Students' social roles are developed as social creatures through group discussions and the Dhuhur congregation. Group discussions to remind students of their role as social beings and congregational prayer develop students' social role as servants who should do good deeds according to Islamic teachings. Teachers use group discussions twice a month. MI Zainul Anwar's group discussion schedule was scheduled for each class because the hall was used as their discussion location. According to the researcher's observations, the group discussion flow begins with determining the material to be discussed; then, the teacher presents the material briefly and concisely, which allows students to ask

various questions; then, students discuss and are invited by the teacher to share their opinions and answers. Meanwhile, at the end of the lesson, the class leader's job is to function as a note-taker who records the conclusions of the discussions that have been held, which will later be shared in the class WhatsApp group.

The routine congregational prayer schedule is held every day at 12.00 during the second break. The congregational process is led by a religious teacher and a muezzin taking turns between male students from representatives of each class. The Head of Curriculum stated that this congregational activity aimed to raise religious awareness and awareness of gender equality among students. This activity develops students' social roles as social creatures and servants of Allah SWT.

Several spiritual growth processes in the independent curriculum to improve student learning experiences tailored to student needs show that learning experiences will not be achieved through verbal exposure alone. So that learning experience is gained and obtained through various learning activities as mentioned above. This means that the subject matter functions more as a tool (means) rather than an end (ends). Spiritual growth, used as an approach in the independent curriculum, illustrates various activities that are not only based on religious values but also uphold the affective aspects students should have. Such as being confident and brave in one's abilities, honing one's presence as a civilized social being, prioritizing individualist or socialist awareness, and involving divine values in madrasa activities. As confirmed by the expression of Hanum & Annas (2019), if a person's Spiritual Quotient has developed well, then the signs that will be visible in a person are (1) the ability to be flexible, (2) a high level of self-awareness, (3) the ability to facing and making use of suffering, (4) the ability to face and transcend pain, (5) quality of life inspired by vision and values, (6) an unwillingness to cause unnecessary harm, (7) a tendency to see the interconnectedness of things (holistic view), and (8) a natural tendency to ask "Why?" or "What if?" to find basic answers.

CONCLUSION

Of several spiritual growth processes in the independent curriculum, including P5, namely developing self-potential, developing self-empowerment, developing self-understanding, developing self-improvement, and developing students' social roles to improve student learning experiences that are tailored to student needs, indicating that the learning experience will not be achieved, through verbal exposure alone. So that learning experience is gained and obtained through various learning activities as mentioned above. This means that the subject matter functions more as a tool (means) rather than an end (ends). Spiritual growth, used as an approach in the independent curriculum, illustrates various activities that are not only based on religious values but also uphold the affective aspects students should have.

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