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Epistemological and Pedagogical Challenges of Kalam Education in the Merdeka Curriculum: A Critical Analysis of Islamic Education Learning Outcomes in Indonesian Senior High Schools

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Abstrak

Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka menekankan pengembangan berpikir kritis, pembentukan karakter, dan pembelajaran kontekstual dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI). Salah satu materi penting PAI kelas XII adalah Ilmu Kalam yang bertujuan memperkuat pemahaman teologis melalui pendekatan rasional. Penelitian ini menganalisis secara kritis Capaian Pembelajaran (CP) Ilmu Kalam pada jenjang SMA menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian kepustakaan, dan analisis kurikulum kritis. Analisis dilakukan melalui empat dimensi, yaitu orientasi filosofis, struktur dokumen kurikulum, implementasi pedagogis, dan hasil pembelajaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga tantangan utama: ketegangan antara penguatan doktrin dan nalar kritis, tuntutan penalaran teologis yang abstrak, serta keterbatasan panduan pedagogis. Penelitian ini menawarkan Contextual Kalam Learning Framework (CKLF) yang mengintegrasikan literasi teologis, penalaran kritis, moderasi beragama, dan literasi keagamaan digital.

Kata Kunci:
Ilmu Kalam
Kurikulum Merdeka
Pendidikan Agama Islam
Analisis Kurikulum Kritis
Literasi Keagamaan
Moderasi Beragama

Keywords:
Kalam Education
Merdeka Curriculum
Islamic Religious Education
Critical Curriculum Analysis
Religious Literacy
Religious Moderation

Abstract

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the development of critical thinking, character building, and contextual learning within Islamic Religious Education (PAI). One of the key components of Grade XII PAI is Kalam Education, which aims to strengthen students' theological understanding through a rational approach. This study critically analyzes the Learning Outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran/CP) of Kalam Education at the senior high school level using a qualitative approach, library research, and critical curriculum analysis. The analysis focuses on four dimensions: philosophical orientation, curriculum document structure, pedagogical implementation, and learning outcomes. The findings reveal three major challenges: the tension between doctrinal reinforcement and critical reasoning, the demand for abstract theological reasoning, and the limited availability of pedagogical guidance. This study proposes the Contextual Kalam Learning Framework (CKLF), which integrates theological literacy, critical reasoning, religious moderation, and digital religious literacy.

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of educational policy in Indonesia through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum marks a significant shift from content-oriented instruction toward competency-based learning. This curriculum emphasizes the development of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and character formation as fundamental competencies required in the twenty-first century. Within this framework, Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) is expected not only to transmit religious knowledge but also to cultivate reflective, ethical, and socially responsible individuals capable of responding to contemporary challenges. Consequently, the orientation of PAI has gradually moved beyond doctrinal instruction toward a more contextual, dialogical, and transformative educational paradigm that aligns religious values with the realities of modern society. Recent studies indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum provides broader

opportunities for integrating critical reasoning and religious moderation into Islamic education, reflecting a growing commitment to producing learners who are both religiously grounded and intellectually engaged.

The transformation of PAI becomes increasingly important in the context of rapid social change, technological advancement, and the expansion of digital religious spaces. Contemporary Muslim students encounter diverse religious narratives not only through formal educational institutions but also through social media platforms, online preachers, digital communities, and algorithm-driven information ecosystems. Such conditions have fundamentally altered the process through which religious knowledge is acquired and interpreted. As a result, Islamic education faces new challenges in fostering religious literacy, critical evaluation skills, and theological understanding among young learners. Several recent studies emphasize that digital literacy has become an essential component of Islamic education because students increasingly construct their religious perspectives through digital interactions rather than solely through classroom learning. The growing influence of digital religious content therefore requires educational institutions to develop approaches capable of helping students critically navigate competing religious claims while maintaining a balanced and moderate religious identity.

Within the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum, one of the most intellectually demanding components of PAI at the senior high school level is Kalam Education. Traditionally, Ilmu Kalam emerged as a discipline of rational theology aimed at defending and explaining Islamic beliefs through logical argumentation and systematic reasoning. Classical discussions within Kalam encompass complex issues such as divine attributes, predestination (qadar), human freedom, the relationship between reason and revelation, and theological disputes among various schools of Islamic thought. Historically, Kalam played a crucial role in the development of Islamic intellectual traditions because it encouraged rational engagement with questions of faith rather than unquestioning acceptance of religious doctrines. From an educational perspective, the inclusion of Kalam in secondary education potentially provides students with opportunities to develop reflective religious reasoning and strengthen their theological foundations through critical inquiry.

However, the integration of Kalam Education into secondary-level learning outcomes raises important epistemological and pedagogical concerns. Although the Merdeka Curriculum promotes critical thinking and student-centered learning, many theological concepts contained within Kalam require advanced abstract reasoning and philosophical reflection. Cognitive development theories suggest that while adolescents begin to develop formal operational thinking, their ability to engage consistently with highly abstract metaphysical concepts varies considerably. Consequently, theological discussions concerning divine will, human agency, and metaphysical causality may exceed the cognitive readiness of some students when presented without adequate contextualization. Furthermore, existing studies on Islamic education implementation reveal that many teachers continue to rely on lecture-based and content-transmission approaches, limiting opportunities for inquiry, reflection, and critical engagement with religious issues. These conditions create a potential mismatch between curriculum expectations and classroom realities.

Another important concern lies in the epistemological orientation of Kalam Education itself. The Merdeka Curriculum simultaneously promotes critical reasoning and the strengthening of religious conviction. While these objectives are not inherently contradictory, their coexistence may generate tensions regarding the purpose of theological learning. Students are encouraged to question, analyze, and evaluate theological concepts, yet they are often expected to arrive at predetermined doctrinal conclusions. Such tensions raise important questions regarding the extent

to which critical inquiry is genuinely facilitated within Islamic education. Recent scholarship on religious moderation and contemporary Islamic education has argued that effective religious learning should cultivate not only doctrinal commitment but also critical religious awareness, intellectual openness, and the capacity to engage constructively with diversity. In this regard, Kalam Education occupies a strategic yet contested position within the broader project of curriculum reform and religious education renewal.

Despite growing scholarly attention to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, studies specifically examining the epistemological foundations and pedagogical implications of Kalam Education remain limited. Existing research has predominantly focused on curriculum implementation, religious moderation, digital literacy, and character development, while the intellectual structure and educational consequences of theological learning outcomes have received comparatively little attention. Therefore, this study aims to critically analyze the Learning Outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran) of Kalam Education in the Merdeka Curriculum for Grade XII students in Indonesian senior high schools. Employing a critical curriculum perspective, the study investigates how theological knowledge is conceptualized, how it aligns with students' cognitive development, and how it may influence the implementation and outcomes of Islamic Religious Education. By addressing these issues, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions concerning curriculum reform, religious literacy, and the future direction of Islamic education in contemporary Indonesia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research design with a critical curriculum analysis perspective. A qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to explore and interpret the epistemological and pedagogical dimensions embedded within the Kalam Education learning outcomes of the Merdeka Curriculum. Rather than measuring educational phenomena quantitatively, qualitative inquiry emphasizes understanding meanings, interpretations, and contextual realities that shape educational practices and policy documents. In this regard, curriculum documents are not viewed merely as administrative instruments but as socially constructed texts that reflect particular philosophical assumptions, educational priorities, and ideological orientations. Therefore, the study adopts a critical curriculum perspective to examine how theological knowledge is conceptualized, structured, and positioned within Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at the senior high school level.

The primary source of data consisted of the official Learning Outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran) document for Islamic Religious Education and Character Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam dan Budi Pekerti) at Phase F (Grade XII Senior High School) under the Merdeka Curriculum issued by the Indonesian Ministry of Education. Secondary data were collected from scholarly sources relevant to curriculum studies, Islamic education, Kalam theology, religious moderation, digital religious literacy, and cognitive development theories. These sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy documents, dissertations, and research reports published between 2020 and 2026. Data collection was conducted through documentation and literature review techniques involving the identification, classification, and critical examination of sources directly related to the research focus. The use of multiple academic sources enabled a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum's theoretical foundations and its potential implications for educational practice.

Data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display,

and conclusion drawing. The analytical process was further guided by a critical curriculum analysis framework focusing on four dimensions: (1) philosophical orientation, (2) curriculum document structure, (3) pedagogical implementation, and (4) expected learning outcomes. To strengthen the interpretation of findings, the study incorporated Piaget's theory of cognitive development and contemporary Islamic educational perspectives emphasizing the integration of theological literacy, critical reasoning, and religious moderation. Through this analytical framework, the study sought to identify epistemological tensions, pedagogical challenges, and curriculum gaps within Kalam Education while proposing a more contextual model for its implementation in contemporary Islamic education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the inclusion of Kalam Education in the Merdeka Curriculum represents an important effort to strengthen theological understanding while promoting critical thinking, reflective learning, and religious moderation among senior high school students. However, the analysis also reveals several epistemological and pedagogical challenges that may affect the achievement of these objectives. Through a critical examination of the Learning Outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran) and their underlying educational assumptions, this study identifies four major concerns: the tension between faith formation and critical inquiry, the cognitive complexity of theological concepts, pedagogical limitations in classroom implementation, and the absence of digital religious literacy. These findings suggest that the success of Kalam Education depends not only on curriculum content but also on how theological knowledge is conceptualized and translated into meaningful learning experiences for contemporary learners.

1. Epistemological Tension Between Faith Formation and Critical Inquiry

   One of the most significant findings of this study concerns the epistemological tension embedded within the learning outcomes of Kalam Education. The Merdeka Curriculum seeks to strengthen students' commitment to Islamic beliefs while simultaneously encouraging critical reasoning and reflective inquiry. Historically, such an approach is consistent with the intellectual tradition of classical Kalam, which employed rational argumentation to defend and explain theological doctrines. Classical Muslim theologians such as al-Ash'ari, al-Maturidi, and al-Ghazali viewed reason ('aql) as an important instrument for understanding revelation and addressing theological disputes. Nevertheless, the translation of these intellectual traditions into contemporary school curricula generates a complex challenge. Students are encouraged to analyze theological issues critically, yet they are ultimately expected to affirm established doctrinal positions. Consequently, the curriculum appears to position critical inquiry not as an open-ended process of knowledge construction but as a mechanism for reinforcing predetermined theological conclusions.

   This condition reflects a broader debate within contemporary Islamic education concerning the relationship between religious commitment and intellectual autonomy. According to Abdullah, Islamic education in the modern era should move beyond purely normative approaches and embrace interdisciplinary perspectives that encourage dialogue, critical reflection, and contextual understanding. Similarly, Sahin argues that meaningful religious education should nurture both faith commitment and intellectual maturity by creating spaces for questioning, interpretation, and self-reflection. However, educational institutions frequently remain cautious about encouraging theological inquiry due to concerns that excessive

questioning may undermine religious certainty. As a result, critical thinking is often promoted as an educational objective while simultaneously constrained by doctrinal boundaries. This contradiction creates ambiguity regarding the ultimate purpose of Kalam Education and may limit students' opportunities to develop authentic theological reasoning.

From the perspective of critical curriculum theory, the tension identified in this study illustrates that curriculum documents are never neutral representations of knowledge. Rather, they embody ideological assumptions regarding what forms of knowledge are considered legitimate and what kinds of learners are expected to emerge from the educational process. Apple argues that curriculum functions as a cultural and political instrument through which particular values and worldviews are reproduced. In the context of Kalam Education, theological knowledge is positioned simultaneously as an object of inquiry and an object of affirmation. While this approach may contribute to strengthening religious identity, it also risks restricting intellectual openness and critical engagement with diverse perspectives. In an increasingly pluralistic and digitally connected society, students require not only doctrinal understanding but also the capacity to evaluate competing religious claims, engage constructively with difference, and develop reflective religious judgments. Therefore, future curriculum development should seek to reconcile faith formation and critical inquiry by positioning theological reflection as an essential component of mature religious commitment rather than as a potential threat to it.

2. Cognitive Complexity of Kalam Concepts

The second finding concerns the cognitive demands embedded within the learning outcomes of Kalam Education. Several competencies require students to examine theological concepts such as divine decree (*qadar*), human freedom, the problem of evil (*theodicy*), and the rational foundations of faith. These issues involve abstract reasoning, hypothetical thinking, and philosophical reflection that extend beyond the memorization of religious doctrines. From the perspective of educational psychology, such concepts require learners to engage with complex causal relationships and competing interpretations, making them substantially more demanding than descriptive or factual religious knowledge.

When analyzed through Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, many of the expected competencies correspond to higher-order thinking skills, particularly the levels of Analyze (C4), Evaluate (C5), and Create (C6). Students are expected not only to understand theological concepts but also to assess arguments, compare perspectives, and formulate reasoned conclusions regarding theological issues. While these objectives are consistent with the competency-based orientation of the Merdeka Curriculum, they may present challenges for students who have not yet developed sufficient abstract reasoning abilities. According to Anderson and Krathwohl, higher-order cognitive processes require learners to integrate conceptual understanding with analytical judgment, a capacity that develops gradually through sustained educational experiences.

This potential mismatch between curriculum expectations and students' cognitive readiness can be further understood through Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Although adolescents generally enter the formal operational stage, the ability to consistently engage in abstract and hypothetical reasoning varies significantly among individuals. Consequently, theological concepts that involve metaphysical and philosophical dimensions may be difficult for some learners to comprehend

without adequate scaffolding and contextualization. Recent studies in religious education similarly emphasize that abstract theological content becomes more meaningful when connected to students' lived experiences and contemporary social realities. Therefore, the successful implementation of Kalam Education requires not only intellectually rigorous content but also pedagogical strategies that align theological inquiry with students' developmental capacities and experiential contexts.

3. Pedagogical Challenges in Classroom Implementation

   The third finding concerns the practical implementation of Kalam Education in classroom settings. Although the Merdeka Curriculum promotes student-centered and contextual learning, the curriculum documents provide limited pedagogical guidance regarding how complex theological concepts should be taught. As a result, teachers are often required to interpret and translate abstract learning outcomes into classroom activities independently. This situation becomes particularly challenging when dealing with topics such as divine decree, free will, and rational theology, which require not only content mastery but also sophisticated instructional approaches capable of facilitating critical dialogue and reflective thinking.

   The findings of this study suggest that many of the pedagogical challenges stem from the continued reliance on conventional teaching methods. In practice, theological learning is frequently delivered through lectures, memorization, and textual explanation rather than inquiry-based, discussion-oriented, or problem-based learning approaches. While these traditional methods may be effective for transmitting doctrinal knowledge, they often provide limited opportunities for students to engage actively with theological questions or construct their own understanding through critical reflection. Research on Islamic Religious Education in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum similarly indicates that teacher readiness, pedagogical innovation, and professional competence remain crucial factors influencing the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.

   Furthermore, the gap between curriculum expectations and classroom realities may reduce the transformative potential of Kalam Education. Contemporary educational theories emphasize that meaningful learning occurs when students actively connect new knowledge with their experiences, social contexts, and personal reflections. Without appropriate pedagogical strategies, theological concepts risk being perceived as abstract and disconnected from everyday life, thereby limiting their relevance for students. Recent studies on religious education have highlighted the importance of dialogical and reflective pedagogies that encourage learners to explore religious issues critically while maintaining respect for faith traditions. Therefore, strengthening teacher capacity, providing pedagogical support, and developing contextual learning resources are essential steps toward ensuring that Kalam Education functions not merely as the transmission of theological information but as a transformative educational experience.

4. The Missing Dimension of Digital Religious Literacy

   Another important finding of this study concerns the limited integration of digital religious literacy within the learning outcomes of Kalam Education. While the Merdeka Curriculum encourages critical thinking and contextual learning, it provides little guidance on how students should engage with the increasingly complex digital religious environment. Contemporary learners frequently encounter theological discussions through social media platforms, online religious communities, podcasts, and digital influencers. These spaces often expose

students to diverse interpretations of Islamic teachings, ranging from moderate perspectives to more exclusive and polarizing viewpoints. Consequently, the ability to critically assess religious information in digital spaces has become an essential component of religious education in the twenty-first century.

The absence of explicit digital religious literacy competencies may reduce the practical relevance of Kalam Education for contemporary students. Traditional theological instruction generally focuses on understanding doctrinal concepts within formal educational settings, whereas students today construct much of their religious knowledge through digital interactions. This shift requires educational institutions to move beyond content transmission and equip learners with the skills necessary to evaluate the credibility, accuracy, and ideological orientation of online religious information. Research on digital religion suggests that young people increasingly rely on social media as a primary source of religious learning, often without sufficient critical awareness regarding the authority and reliability of digital content. Therefore, theological education that ignores the digital dimension risks becoming disconnected from the realities of students' everyday religious experiences.

From a pedagogical perspective, integrating digital religious literacy into Kalam Education would strengthen students' capacity to navigate theological diversity while promoting reflective and responsible religious engagement. Such an approach aligns with broader educational goals related to critical media literacy, democratic citizenship, and religious moderation. Recent scholarship emphasizes that digital literacy in religious education should not merely involve technological competence but also the ability to analyze religious narratives, recognize misinformation, and engage constructively with differing viewpoints. By incorporating these competencies into the curriculum, Kalam Education can become more responsive to contemporary challenges and better prepare students to participate in increasingly interconnected and pluralistic digital societies.

5. Proposed Framework: Contextual Kalam Learning Framework (CKLF)

To address the challenges identified in the previous sections, this study proposes the Contextual Kalam Learning Framework (CKLF) as a conceptual model for strengthening Kalam Education within the Merdeka Curriculum. The framework is built on the assumption that theological learning should not be limited to doctrinal transmission but should also develop students' capacity for critical reasoning, contextual understanding, and responsible engagement with contemporary religious issues. The proposed framework therefore integrates four interconnected dimensions: theological literacy, critical religious reasoning, digital religious literacy, and religious moderation. By combining these dimensions, CKLF seeks to align the intellectual heritage of Kalam with the educational goals of competency-based learning and twenty-first-century citizenship.

The first dimension, theological literacy, emphasizes a grounded understanding of core Islamic beliefs through evidence-based reasoning rather than mere memorization. Students are encouraged to explore theological concepts such as divine decree, human agency, and the relationship between reason and revelation in ways that connect classical Islamic thought with contemporary questions. The second dimension, critical religious reasoning, focuses on developing analytical and reflective engagement with theological issues. This dimension aims to cultivate students' ability to compare arguments, evaluate interpretations, and formulate reasoned judgments while maintaining respect for religious traditions.

Such an approach is consistent with educational perspectives that view critical thinking as an essential component of mature religious understanding.

The third dimension, digital religious literacy, addresses the growing influence of online religious content on students' beliefs and practices. It encourages learners to assess the credibility of digital sources, recognize misinformation, and engage responsibly with theological discussions in digital spaces. The fourth dimension, religious moderation, seeks to promote tolerance, dialogue, and constructive participation in pluralistic societies. Integrating these dimensions enables Kalam Education to function not merely as a mechanism for reinforcing doctrine but as a transformative educational process that cultivates reflective, critically aware, and socially responsible Muslim identities. In this sense, CKLF offers a more contextual and holistic model for implementing Kalam Education within contemporary Indonesian Islamic education.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that the challenges surrounding Kalam Education in the Merdeka Curriculum are multidimensional. The curriculum aspires to cultivate both strong religious commitment and critical reasoning, yet these objectives create epistemological tensions that are not fully resolved within the current learning outcomes. At the same time, the abstract and philosophical nature of many Kalam concepts places substantial cognitive demands on students, while classroom implementation remains constrained by limited pedagogical guidance and teacher readiness. These issues are further complicated by the rapid expansion of digital religious environments, which expose students to diverse theological narratives that are not adequately addressed in the curriculum. In response to these interconnected challenges, the Contextual Kalam Learning Framework (CKLF) offers a conceptual alternative that integrates theological literacy, critical religious reasoning, digital religious literacy, and religious moderation. The framework therefore provides a pathway for reorienting Kalam Education from predominantly doctrinal instruction toward a more contextual, reflective, and transformative model of Islamic education suited to contemporary pluralistic societies.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Kalam Education within the Merdeka Curriculum holds considerable potential for strengthening students' theological understanding while fostering critical religious literacy. The curriculum reflects an important shift from traditional content-oriented religious instruction toward a competency-based approach that encourages reflection, reasoning, and contextual engagement with religious knowledge. Through the integration of theological concepts into the Learning Outcomes of Islamic Religious Education, students are expected not only to understand the foundations of Islamic belief but also to develop the intellectual capacity to engage with theological questions in a thoughtful and responsible manner.

Despite these promising objectives, the findings reveal several challenges that may limit the effectiveness of Kalam Education in achieving its intended outcomes. The analysis identified an unresolved epistemological tension between the reinforcement of established religious doctrines and the promotion of critical inquiry. While students are encouraged to think critically and reflectively, the curriculum simultaneously directs them toward predetermined theological conclusions. In addition, many of the theological concepts included in the curriculum require advanced levels of abstraction and reasoning that may exceed the developmental readiness of some learners. These challenges indicate the need for a more balanced alignment between

curriculum expectations, cognitive development, and educational practice.

The study also found that the successful implementation of Kalam Education is closely related to pedagogical factors and the broader educational context in which learning occurs. Limited instructional guidance, reliance on conventional teaching methods, and insufficient attention to digital religious environments may reduce the relevance and transformative potential of theological learning. In an era where students increasingly encounter religious knowledge through digital platforms and social media, theological education must move beyond classroom-based content transmission and equip learners with the skills necessary to critically evaluate religious information, engage with diverse perspectives, and navigate contemporary religious challenges responsibly.

Based on these findings, this study proposes the Contextual Kalam Learning Framework (CKLF) as a conceptual model for strengthening Kalam Education within the Merdeka Curriculum. By integrating theological literacy, critical religious reasoning, digital religious literacy, and religious moderation, the framework offers a more holistic approach to theological learning that is responsive to contemporary educational realities. Future curriculum development should therefore place greater emphasis on contextualization, cognitive appropriateness, and pedagogical innovation to ensure that Kalam Education contributes not only to the reinforcement of religious belief but also to the formation of reflective, intellectually mature, and socially responsible Muslim citizens in contemporary Indonesian society.

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