

Implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in improving students' learning motivation

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar) and its impact on enhancing learning motivation among Grade X students at SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo during the 2023/2024 academic year. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the research involved field observations, interviews with school leaders, teachers, and students, and document analysis. The findings reveal that the curriculum was implemented through three structured phases: planning, implementation, and evaluation. In the planning phase, the school prioritized teacher training, teaching module preparation, and infrastructural readiness. The implementation phase was marked by differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and diagnostic assessments tailored to student needs. The evaluation phase emphasized reflection and continuous improvement. As a result, students demonstrated increased motivation, characterized by higher engagement, improved classroom atmosphere, and enhanced self-confidence. The study found a decline in the number of students categorized as less motivated and a rise in the moderately motivated and highly motivated categories. These outcomes align with the principles of Self-Determination Theory, emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The research concludes that effective implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum fosters intrinsic motivation and promotes student-centered learning. This study contributes valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to strengthen motivation and engagement through adaptive curriculum reforms.

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Introduction

Education is widely recognized as the cornerstone of national development (Basir et al., 2024). The success of an education system is not solely determined by a well-structured curriculum, but by its responsiveness to contemporary challenges and the evolving needs of learners. In response to the disruption era and the wave of digital transformation, Indonesia has introduced the Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) Curriculum as a strategic initiative to establish an adaptive, flexible, and student-centered educational framework. This curriculum grants autonomy to educational institutions and teachers in designing learning processes that reflect student characteristics and local school contexts (Ali & Mulasi, 2023; Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022). It marks a pivotal shift from a teacher-centered paradigm to student-centered learning.

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum emphasizes project-based learning, the development of the Pancasila Student Profile, and flexibility in determining learning content and instructional methods (Sappaile, 2025; Wahyuni, 2023). This pedagogical model is believed to enhance students' motivation by actively involving them in their learning processes and offering them opportunities to explore their interests, talents, and capabilities (Miswaty et al., 2025). Ryan and Deci (2020), through their Self-Determination Theory, assert that intrinsic motivation emerges when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The Merdeka Curriculum fosters such autonomy, empowering students to engage in self-directed learning aligned with their personal goals and interests, which in turn stimulates deeper engagement and enthusiasm for learning.

Learning motivation is a critical psychological factor influencing educational success. Hestiningrum (2022) describes learning motivation as the driving force behind behaviors that lead directly to learning engagement. Caesarani et al. (2022) further conceptualize motivation as an internal and external impetus that fosters behavioral change, often reflected in persistence, determination, and interest in academic subjects. In the absence of strong motivation, learners are unlikely to engage meaningfully with academic content, regardless of the availability of high-quality resources or curricula. It is therefore imperative to assess whether the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum effectively enhances students' motivation to learn.

Previous studies have indicated a positive correlation between adaptive curriculum design and increased learner motivation. For instance, Mardiana and Emmiyati (2024) report that implementing the Merdeka Curriculum significantly enhances both motivation and active participation in classroom activities. Similarly, Z. F. Utami (2024) found that the curriculum positively influences students' motivation in Indonesian language learning. Mobonggi and Hakeu (2023) also highlight that the curriculum's flexibility allows students greater opportunities to develop their potential and engage more actively in learning. However, successful implementation remains contingent upon teacher readiness, institutional infrastructure, and students' comprehension of the curriculum's objectives.

Despite its promising framework, a notable discrepancy persists between the curriculum's ideal vision and its practical application. Many educators remain in the adaptation phase, lacking a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum's essence. Taufik et al. (2023) reveal that some teachers encounter difficulties in designing teaching modules and aligning assessments with project-based learning. These challenges may diminish the curriculum's effectiveness and, subsequently, hinder students' learning motivation. A poorly implemented curriculum may lead to student confusion and disinterest in academic activities.

At SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo, which adopted the Merdeka Curriculum in the 2023/2024 academic year, such challenges are also present. Given that Grade X students are at the early stage of upper secondary education, their adjustment to a new curriculum and learning environment warrants close examination. Preliminary observations indicate that despite the curriculum's emphasis on learner autonomy, not all students exhibit high levels of motivation. This underscores the need for an in-depth investigation into the actual impact of curriculum implementation on student motivation.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in two major frameworks. First, Skinner's Behaviorist Theory suggests that learning motivation can be shaped through appropriate stimuli from the learning environment (Ilmiyah, 2024; Skinner, 1986). Second, Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory emphasizes the importance of emotional and psychological involvement in learning (Apriyanto et al., 2025; Sartika et al., 2025; Widiyanto & Fauzi, 2025). These theories align with the holistic nature of the Merdeka Curriculum, which integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Woolfolk and Hoy (2019) further argues that learning environments which promote student

participation foster a sense of ownership, leading to enhanced motivation and educational outcomes.

In terms of novelty, this research offers a specific and contextualized perspective by focusing on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum within a Muhammadiyah school environment a setting characterized by its religious orientation, discipline, and strong Islamic educational values. Previous studies tend to generalize findings without addressing how this curriculum interacts with faith-based school cultures. Therefore, this research is expected to contribute new insights to Indonesian educational discourse, particularly concerning the integration of national curriculum frameworks with the unique ethos of modern Islamic schooling.

Through this research, a comprehensive understanding is expected to emerge regarding the extent to which the Merdeka Curriculum enhances Grade X students' learning motivation at SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo. The study's findings may serve as valuable input for educators, school leaders, and policymakers in refining curriculum implementation. Additionally, the research aims to inspire the development of more effective, innovative, and student-centered instructional strategies.

Based on the background and issues outlined above, this study formulates the following primary research questions: 1) How is the Merdeka Curriculum implemented at SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo during the 2023/2024 academic year? 2) To what extent does the Merdeka Curriculum contribute to enhancing the learning motivation of Grade X students at SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo in the 2023/2024 academic year?

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a field research design. This approach was selected because it aims to gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena from the perspective of the research subjects, thereby providing a holistic and comprehensive portrayal of the reality in the field. Fadli (2021) states that the qualitative approach is naturalistic and contextual, as the researcher does not impose treatments, manipulations, or controls on the research variables, but rather allows the phenomena to occur as they are. In this context, the researcher functions as the primary instrument for collecting and interpreting data.

The type of research used is field research, which involves direct investigation at the location where the phenomenon occurs. Field research is essential in qualitative studies because it enables the researcher to engage directly with the subject of study, ensuring that the data obtained are factual and contextually grounded (Nurhayati et al., 2024). This study was conducted at SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo in August 2024. The site was chosen based on the consideration that the school has actively implemented the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) and is considered representative for exploring its impact on the learning motivation of Grade X students.

The subjects of this research are the Grade X teachers who implement the Kurikulum Merdeka in their teaching practices. The main informants include the school principal, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, subject teachers of Grade X, and the Grade X students themselves. The informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on specific considerations relevant to the research objectives. According to Hadi (2021) and Patton (2002), purposive sampling in qualitative research is used to select informants who possess experience, knowledge, and direct involvement with the topic under study, enabling them to provide rich and in-depth information.

Data collection techniques in this research include participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to directly examine the

implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in classrooms, particularly focusing on teachers' strategies to enhance students' learning motivation. Spradley (1980) and Handoko et al. (2024) explain that participatory observation allows researchers to capture implicit meanings that are not verbally expressed by the subjects. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, students, and school leaders using a semi-structured format to ensure that the data remained focused while allowing for the exploration of relevant issues. This approach aligns with Creswell (2003) and T. H. Utami et al. (2025), who argue that semi-structured interviews are effective in capturing deep experiences and perceptions from respondents. Meanwhile, documentation served to complement and strengthen the data gathered through observation and interviews, such as activity photos, lesson records, and curriculum documents (Bowen, 2009; Husnullail & Jailani, 2024)

To ensure data validity, this study applied source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing information from different informants, while methodological triangulation was carried out by cross-verifying data obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation. Denzin (2017) and Susanto et al. (2023) emphasize that triangulation is a crucial technique in qualitative research to enhance the credibility and validity of findings and to minimize data bias.

The data analysis process in this study adopts the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014). This model consists of three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involves sorting and filtering information relevant to the research focus. The reduced data are then presented in descriptive narrative form to facilitate comprehension. The final stage is drawing conclusions and verification, which is the process of interpreting the presented data to comprehensively answer the research questions. This analysis process is cyclical, meaning that the researcher continuously engages in data collection, reduction, and presentation until valid findings are reached.

Result

Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum at SMA Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo

SMA Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo implements the learning process with the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum like other schools. The principal then explained and explained that the learning at SMA Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo had used the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum starting from the 2023/2024 academic year, which was applied to class X.

As for the stages that Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo High School went through in the context of implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, there are many stages, but the researcher wants to take three important stages in the stages of implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Among them are three stages including: the planning stage, the implementation stage, and the evaluation stage. Of the three stages, the researcher will discuss one by one regarding the explanation.

Planning Stages

This first stage is very important to be carried out by any school and whatever its purpose, starting with the planning. Good goals, ideals, and expectations will not be achieved well with good planning either. On the other hand, if the school, students' educational goals, students' goals without starting and accompanied by good and correct planning, undoubtedly when in the middle of the road process will feel shaky, difficulties, and obstacles that are difficult to pass because without starting with good planning. Education it must also go through with the existence of this first stage which is called the planning stage. So what are the factors that include the planning

stages in the implementation of this independent curriculum including: HR (Human Resources), RPP (Learning Implementation Plan), Teaching Modules, Facilities and Infrastructure.

Human Resources (HR), namely from teachers in schools, seen from the competencies possessed by teachers both from professional competence, pedagogical competence, personality competence and from their social competence. Because only the teacher will be the driving force in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Because it is still early, many trainings are held for teachers in implementing the independent learning curriculum.

ATP and Teaching Modules, lesson plans and teaching modules are one of the parts of this independent learning curriculum that must be included in the first stage in implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. So that the material that will be delivered to students can achieve these educational goals.

Facilities and infrastructure, These facilities and infrastructure must also be prepared in advance planning before implementing the independent learning curriculum, both from facilities and infrastructure for schools and facilities and infrastructure for students. If the planning of these facilities and infrastructure is not carefully prepared, it could be an obstacle in the implementation of the independent learning curriculum and the objectives in education are less than optimal.

Implementation Stage

After passing the first stage (planning stage) is ready, what is needed is the action, in other words, the implementation stage. So in the implementation of this independent curriculum implementation, it is necessary to have strong direction and motivation. So that teachers, students and all those involved in this, as the driving force for the implementation of the independent curriculum are required to carry out activities optimally according to their respective roles, duties and responsibilities.

This implementation stage also needs a lot of training for teachers in implementing the independent learning curriculum. So that this implementation stage becomes easier to do and achieves the educational goals expected by the teacher.

Evaluation Stage

This evaluation stage is carried out after the two stages above have been carried out properly, there will definitely be shortcomings, imperfections, obstacles, obstacles and so on. Then the solution is by means of stages in the evaluation.

This third stage is a process in assessing something based on certain criteria that give rise to a collection of data or information that will be needed. Evaluate what has been running and what has not been implemented in education through the first planning stage. If it is found that in the implementation stage there is still something that is not appropriate, it has not been implemented what was planned at the beginning in achieving the educational goals of the independent learning curriculum, then there is a need for evaluation. That is, fixing what is still not appropriate and has not been implemented, but not just that, but must also develop what is best for the future. Whether evaluating the curriculum, teachers, facilities and infrastructure and others.

So that what has happened in the past becomes a stepping stone to become better, focusing on the learning objectives. Meanwhile, what has gone well must be maintained well, it remains only to perfect the things that are lacking in the implementation of the independent learning curriculum implementation.

So the researchers observed that in these three stages it is very important to be carried out in school institutions, including the planning stage, the implementation stage and the evaluation stage. Especially in the implementation of the independent learning curriculum. And the implementation of the independent learning curriculum by going through these three stages is also carried out by the Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo High School.

Increasing Student Learning Motivation at Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo High School

Researchers pay attention to the implementation of the independent learning curriculum planned by the principal of SMA Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo Danang Guntur so that schools can excel in learning achievement by using a new curriculum commonly known as the independent learning curriculum.

The implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum at SMA Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo has been running for approximately two years. With the implementation of the independent learning curriculum, one of the uses is to increase students' motivation or learning spirit in pursuing knowledge and dreamed goals.

At the Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo High School, previously it had used curriculum 13 which is usually called the 2013 curriculum but now it is moving to a new curriculum, namely the independent learning curriculum. Which of the curriculum 13 has used several methods in increasing student motivation and this is different from the new curriculum which is more focused on students, how the child can bring out the talents latent in them.

SMA Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo used to use K13 before moving to the independent learning curriculum. Which K13 emphasizes the character of students.

Table 1.1. Data on the Improvement of Student Motivation in Class X

Research class	Before	After
Learning motivation	Difficult to improve	Easy to improve
Learning Intensity	Rarely study	Always learning
Passion for learning	Lack of enthusiasm	More enthusiastic
Learning atmosphere in class	boring	Fun
Experiencing difficulties when studying	because it's hard to understand	Easy to understand

Answer table from above

Research	Before	After
Less motivated	12 children	8 students
Moderately motivated	8 children	10 students
Highly motivated	5 children	7 students

Researchers observe from the data table that it is clear that the implementation of the independent learning curriculum can increase motivation, enthusiasm for student learning and can provide easy solutions for students who are difficult to understand in a subject at SMA Muhammadiyah Sukoharjo. And this is as a statement from student interviews at SMA Muhammadiyah Sukoharjo regarding students' responses to the implementation of this independent learning curriculum. "This Independent Curriculum is more fun, more creative, more

efficient because it develops and releases the potential possessed by students to be shown and displayed to their friends".

In addition, there is also a response from one of the Khoirul Huda teachers at SMA Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo regarding the implementation of the independent learning curriculum on student motivation, enthusiasm for learning. As follows his statement from Khoirul Huda "The implementation of the independent learning curriculum has increased students' enthusiasm, motivation to learn, one of the forms is that students are more diligent, enter on time, and are more confident to appear in front." So the researcher concluded that the two statements were clear, clearly showing that the implementation of the independent learning curriculum could, was able to increase the enthusiasm, motivation for student learning at Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo High School.

Discussion

Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum at SMA Muhammadiyah 01 Sukoharjo

Based on interviews with the principal, teachers, and students, it was found that SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo began to gradually implement the Independent Learning Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in the 2023/2024 academic year, specifically for Grade X. This implementation involves three main stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Planning Stage: Planning serves as the fundamental foundation in curriculum implementation. At this school, the planning stage focused on the preparation of instructional tools such as ATP (Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran or Learning Objectives Flow), teaching modules, and the provision of supporting facilities and infrastructure. Additionally, enhancing teachers' competencies through training on the Independent Curriculum was also prioritized. This aligns with Glickman's (2013) theory that the planning phase in instructional management must include curriculum alignment, instructional strategies, and human resource readiness to achieve educational goals. In the context of the Independent Curriculum, teachers are expected to become "active facilitators" who can guide students' learning processes according to their interests and needs.

Implementation Stage: During this stage, teachers conduct differentiated instruction, accommodate students' learning styles, and apply diagnostic assessments as a basis for planning their lessons. The researcher observed that teachers at SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo employed various approaches such as project-based learning and student self-reflection to build the Pancasila Student Profile. As Wiggins and McTighe (2005) state in the Understanding by Design approach, instructional implementation should be directed toward achieving meaningful goals and promoting authentic, contextual learning.

Evaluation Stage: Evaluation is carried out to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum implementation and to facilitate continuous improvement. Evaluation methods include teacher meetings, classroom reflections, as well as assessments of students' competency achievements and their engagement in the learning process. This stage is crucial, as highlighted by Stufflebeam (2003) in the CIPP model (Context, Input, Process, Product), which emphasizes that educational evaluation should address both process and outcome dimensions to enable holistic and sustainable improvements.

Enhancing Learning Motivation of Grade X Students

One of the primary focuses of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) is to foster students' intrinsic learning motivation. Based on observations and interviews, an increase in

learning motivation among Grade X students was evident following the implementation of the curriculum. Indicators of this improvement include: 1) Increased enthusiasm for learning, 2) Greater confidence to speak in front of the class, 3) Higher study intensity, 4) A more enjoyable and collaborative learning environment.

Quantitative data showed a decrease in the number of students categorized as “less motivated” from 12 to 8, along with an increase in the “moderately motivated” and “highly motivated” categories. These findings suggest that the Independent Curriculum provides students with space to explore their interests and talents, thereby enhancing engagement and motivation in the learning process.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000) in the Self-Determination Theory, learning motivation increases when individuals feel a sense of autonomy over their learning process, perceive themselves as competent, and experience positive social relationships. The Independent Curriculum allows students to design their own learning projects, choose their preferred learning methods, and receive constructive feedback from teachers. This motivation is further supported by a student-centered learning approach, where students are treated as the primary agents in their education, rather than mere recipients of information. This aligns with Sartika et al. (2025) view that a humanistic and supportive learning environment naturally fosters motivational growth.

The Relationship Between Curriculum Implementation and Learning Motivation

The findings of this study indicate that the success of Independent Curriculum implementation significantly influences the enhancement of students' learning motivation. Three key aspects serve as a bridge between curriculum and motivation: 1) Active student engagement in the learning process through project-based learning and self-reflection, 2) The use of diagnostic and formative assessments, which validate students' diverse learning styles and abilities, 3) The creation of expressive and developmental spaces that provide opportunities for students to perform, be creative, and showcase their talents. 4) This connection is consistent with Uno's (2023) findings, which state that learning motivation is influenced by the classroom atmosphere, the teaching approaches used, and the quality of the teacher-student relationship.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo during the 2023/2024 academic year demonstrates a structured and thoughtful approach. Carried out through three key stages planning, implementation, and evaluation the curriculum is actively adapted to the school's vision and capacity. The planning stage involved the preparation of learning tools, teacher training, and infrastructure support. In the implementation stage, various student-centered strategies, such as project-based learning and differentiated instruction, were employed. Meanwhile, the evaluation stage focused on reflection and improvement to ensure continuous development.

Findings from this study reveal that the Merdeka Curriculum has had a positive impact on enhancing the learning motivation of Grade X students. This is evidenced by increased student enthusiasm, more active participation in learning activities, improved learning intensity, and a more enjoyable classroom atmosphere. Quantitative data also show a shift in student motivation levels, with more students categorized as moderately and highly motivated after the curriculum's implementation.

Theoretically, these findings support Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that motivation increases when learners experience autonomy, competence, and

relatedness. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on learner agency and flexibility aligns well with this theory, fostering a learning environment where students feel empowered and engaged.

Ultimately, the success of this curriculum depends not only on its design but also on the readiness and commitment of educators, the adequacy of institutional support, and the responsiveness to students' diverse needs. Thus, the Merdeka Curriculum holds great potential to enhance both the quality of learning and the personal development of students when implemented with fidelity, creativity, and reflection.

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