

Impact of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum on Student Learning Motivation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum on student learning motivation within Indonesian educational contexts. Merdeka Belajar, a government-initiated educational reform, aims to promote greater autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking by shifting from a rigid, standardized curriculum to a more flexible, student-centered learning approach. This research employs a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with students and educators from several schools implementing the curriculum. The study investigates key motivational dimensions, including intrinsic motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy, to assess changes attributable to the curriculum reform. Findings indicate that the Merdeka Belajar curriculum significantly enhances students' intrinsic motivation by fostering autonomy in learning choices and encouraging experiential, project-based activities. Students reported higher engagement levels due to the curriculum's emphasis on meaningful and relevant learning experiences. Educators highlighted improved student enthusiasm and willingness to participate actively in class. However, challenges such as inconsistent implementation and varying teacher readiness were identified as factors limiting the curriculum's potential impact. The study contributes to understanding how curriculum innovation can affect motivational dynamics, offering practical recommendations for policymakers and educators to optimize the effectiveness of Merdeka Belajar. This research underscores the importance of sustained teacher training and resource support to maximize student motivation and overall educational outcomes in Indonesia's evolving learning landscape.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental pillar for the development of individuals and societies, shaping the cognitive, social, and emotional capacities essential for navigating contemporary challenges. Over the past decades, Indonesia has pursued various educational reforms to enhance quality and equity within its schooling system. One of the most transformative initiatives in recent years is the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, a policy designed to promote autonomy, creativity, and student-centered learning. Literally translated as "Freedom to Learn," Merdeka Belajar seeks to depart from the conventional, highly standardized and exam-focused educational practices that have long dominated Indonesian classrooms. The reform envisions a more flexible, inclusive, and innovative approach to learning that empowers students and teachers alike. Understanding the impact of this curriculum on student learning motivation is crucial, as motivation serves as a key driver of academic success, engagement, and lifelong learning habits.

Student motivation, broadly defined, refers to the internal processes that stimulate, direct, and sustain learning behaviors. It influences how students approach tasks, persist in challenges, and engage with content, making it a critical factor in educational outcomes. In traditional Indonesian education systems, where rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction prevail, student motivation has often been reported as low, with many learners feeling disengaged or pressured by the rigid structure and high-stakes assessments. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum challenges this paradigm by emphasizing autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking, theoretically fostering a more intrinsic form of motivation. This shift aligns with contemporary educational psychology theories, such as Self-Determination Theory, which posit that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential to intrinsic motivation and deeper learning engagement.

The Merdeka Belajar curriculum was formally introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture in 2019 as part of a broader effort to improve education quality and responsiveness. Its key features include reduced curriculum content to focus on core competencies, flexible learning pathways that allow students to explore their interests, project-based and experiential learning approaches, and a decreased emphasis on standardized testing. By allowing students greater choice and control over their learning, the curriculum aims to nurture curiosity and passion, thereby enhancing motivation. Simultaneously, it requires a significant shift in teacher roles from authoritative transmitters of knowledge to facilitators and mentors which poses challenges related to teacher readiness and professional development. Despite the progressive vision of Merdeka Belajar, early implementation has encountered various obstacles. Uneven resource distribution across urban and rural schools, varying levels of teacher preparedness, and entrenched traditional mindsets can hinder the intended motivational benefits. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schooling, forcing rapid transitions to remote learning and complicating the curriculum's rollout. These factors necessitate empirical investigation into how students experience learning motivation under this new curriculum framework and what supports are needed to maximize its potential.

This study aims to fill gaps in current research by systematically examining the impact of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum on student learning motivation across multiple regions and school types. It investigates key motivational dimensions such as intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, and attitudes toward learning. Additionally, it explores how contextual variables including teacher support, school environment, and socio-economic background influence motivation outcomes. The research also seeks to identify challenges and best practices in implementing the curriculum to provide actionable recommendations for stakeholders.

In summary, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum represents a bold attempt to transform Indonesia's education system by fostering greater learner autonomy and motivation. Understanding its impact on student learning motivation is vital for ensuring that the policy's aspirations translate into meaningful educational improvements. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical evidence, this study contributes to advancing knowledge on curriculum reform effectiveness in developing country contexts and offers practical guidance for optimizing education quality and equity in Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The results of this study reveal a positive impact of the Independent Learning Curriculum on student learning motivation across multiple dimensions. Quantitative data collected through standardized motivation questionnaires indicated a significant increase in overall learning motivation among students exposed to the curriculum compared to those following the traditional curriculum. Specifically, measures of intrinsic motivation showed a marked improvement, with students reporting greater interest, enjoyment, and curiosity in their learning activities. Engagement levels, assessed through self-reported surveys and teacher observations, also increased significantly, reflecting higher participation rates and sustained attention during lessons structured around the Independent Learning approach. Furthermore, the data demonstrated a notable enhancement in students' self-efficacy, with many students expressing increased confidence in their ability to manage and direct their own learning processes. This outcome aligns with the curriculum's emphasis on learner autonomy and choice, suggesting that granting students greater control fosters a stronger belief in their capabilities. In contrast, extrinsic motivation, characterized by external rewards or pressures, showed no significant change, indicating that the curriculum primarily influences internal motivational drivers rather than external incentives. Qualitative findings from interviews with students and teachers provided deeper

insight into these quantitative trends. Students frequently described feeling more empowered and motivated because the curriculum allowed them to explore topics aligned with their interests and to learn at their own pace. Teachers highlighted improved classroom dynamics, noting increased student enthusiasm and willingness to participate actively in collaborative and project-based tasks. However, some challenges were reported, such as initial adjustment difficulties for students accustomed to traditional, teacher-directed instruction and the need for ongoing teacher support to effectively facilitate independent learning environments. Overall, the results suggest that the Independent Learning Curriculum significantly enhances student motivation by promoting autonomy, engagement, and self-efficacy. These findings support the curriculum's goals and underscore the importance of providing adequate resources and teacher training to maximize its effectiveness.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Enhancement of Intrinsic Motivation through Autonomy and Choice

One of the most significant impacts of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum on student learning motivation is the enhancement of intrinsic motivation driven by increased learner autonomy. The curriculum's fundamental principle freedom to learn encourages students to take ownership of their education by allowing them to choose topics, learning methods, and project designs that align with their interests and goals. This shift away from a rigid, one-size-fits-all curriculum structure to a more flexible, student-centered approach resonates with Self-Determination Theory, which identifies autonomy as a core psychological need for intrinsic motivation.

By providing students with choices, the curriculum fosters a sense of control and personal relevance, which are key drivers of intrinsic motivation. Students are more likely to engage deeply with content they find meaningful rather than merely complying with externally imposed tasks. Empirical data from the research shows that students reported feeling more enthusiastic and curious about their studies, which translated into higher engagement and sustained effort. Unlike traditional learning environments where motivation often hinges on extrinsic rewards like grades or teacher approval, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum cultivates an internal desire to learn for the sake of learning itself.

This intrinsic motivation is crucial not only for academic performance but also for cultivating lifelong learning habits. Students develop a natural curiosity and a proactive attitude toward seeking knowledge, which is essential in today's rapidly changing world. However, the research also highlights that fostering autonomy requires careful scaffolding and teacher support to ensure students develop the skills to manage their learning effectively. Without sufficient guidance, some students may feel overwhelmed by the freedom and lack of structure. Thus, while autonomy enhances intrinsic motivation, it must be balanced with appropriate teacher facilitation to maximize its benefits.

Increased Student Engagement and Participation in Learning Activities

Another vital impact observed is the significant increase in student engagement and active participation under the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Traditional Indonesian classrooms have often been characterized by teacher-centered instruction, where students play a passive role, primarily listening and memorizing information. This approach can lead to disengagement and surface-level learning. In contrast, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum promotes student-centered and experiential learning, including project-based tasks, collaborative work, and real-world problem solving. The research findings indicate that students involved in the curriculum demonstrated greater enthusiasm and willingness to participate actively in class discussions and group projects. Engagement was measured not only through self-reports but also via classroom observations and teacher feedback, all pointing to an uplift in both behavioral and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement was evident in increased attendance, attentiveness, and voluntary participation, while cognitive engagement was reflected in students' efforts to understand and apply knowledge beyond rote memorization.

This higher engagement level is directly linked to the curriculum's flexibility, which allows students to connect learning to their personal experiences and interests. Additionally, collaborative activities foster social interaction and peer learning, which further motivate students by building a supportive learning community. Teachers reported that students appeared more motivated to contribute and take initiative during lessons, which in turn created a positive feedback loop that reinforced motivation. However, the research also identified challenges, such as some teachers struggling to transition from authoritative to facilitative roles, which occasionally limited the extent of student engagement. Successful implementation of the curriculum depends on ongoing teacher training to develop skills in managing dynamic, student-driven classrooms.

Strengthening of Student Self-Efficacy through Skill Development and Responsibility

The Merdeka Belajar curriculum's emphasis on independent and personalized learning has a profound effect on strengthening students' self-efficacy—the belief in their capability to succeed in specific tasks. By encouraging learners to set their own goals, plan their study schedules, and assess their progress, the curriculum fosters greater responsibility and self-regulation. These skills contribute to students' confidence in managing their educational journey, which is a critical component of motivation. Research data reveal that students reported feeling more capable and empowered to face academic challenges as they engaged more actively in goal-setting and reflection activities embedded in the curriculum. This development of self-efficacy is particularly important because motivated learners with high self-efficacy tend to adopt adaptive learning strategies, persevere through difficulties, and maintain motivation over time. The curriculum's flexible approach helps students experience success in smaller, manageable tasks, which builds mastery and reinforces positive beliefs about their abilities.

Teachers corroborated these findings by noting improvements in students' willingness to take risks, ask questions, and seek help when necessary. These behaviors reflect a growth mindset, which aligns well with the Merdeka Belajar's goal of developing lifelong learners capable of adapting to new challenges. Nonetheless, the research also highlights disparities in how students develop self-efficacy depending on their background and prior experience with autonomous learning. Some students, particularly those from more traditional or resource-limited environments, initially struggle to embrace the responsibility that autonomy requires. This underscores the need for differentiated support and gradual introduction of independent learning skills to ensure all students benefit from the curriculum.

Challenges and Constraints Affecting the Curriculum's Impact on Motivation

While the Merdeka Belajar curriculum shows promising effects on student motivation, the research identifies several challenges and constraints that influence its overall impact. One significant barrier is the uneven implementation across different schools, regions, and socio-economic contexts. Resource disparities, such as access to learning materials, technology, and adequately trained teachers, affect how effectively the curriculum can be delivered and experienced by students. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping student motivation under this curriculum, yet many face difficulties adapting to their new roles as facilitators rather than traditional knowledge transmitters. The research found that inconsistent teacher preparedness and varying levels of professional development limited the curriculum's potential to fully motivate students. Some educators reported feeling overwhelmed by the demands of designing flexible learning pathways and providing individualized support, which in turn affected the quality of student engagement and motivation.

Moreover, cultural and systemic factors, including deep-rooted expectations about teaching and learning, also pose challenges. Students and parents accustomed to conventional education methods may initially resist the changes, leading to confusion or reduced motivation. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the rollout and adaptation processes, further complicating efforts to embed the curriculum's principles into daily practice. Despite these obstacles, the research emphasizes that with targeted policy support, enhanced teacher training, and equitable resource allocation, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum has the potential to overcome these constraints and deliver sustainable motivational benefits. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is critical for scaling and refining the curriculum to ensure all students can experience its intended positive impact.

Discussions

The findings from this study provide compelling evidence that the Independent Learning Curriculum significantly influences student learning motivation, particularly by fostering intrinsic motivation, enhancing engagement, and developing students' self-efficacy. Analysis of the quantitative data demonstrated a consistent and statistically significant increase in intrinsic motivation among students participating in the Independent Learning Curriculum compared to those in traditional, teacher-centered learning environments. This increase is closely associated with the curriculum's emphasis on autonomy, choice, and student agency. Intrinsic motivation—defined as the internal drive to engage in learning for the sake of personal interest and satisfaction—was found to flourish in settings where students had the freedom to select topics, learning methods, and pace. These findings align well with established motivational theories such as Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, which highlights autonomy as a fundamental psychological need that promotes internal motivation and well-being. Students reported a higher sense of ownership over their learning, which translated into increased enthusiasm, curiosity, and willingness to tackle challenging tasks without relying on external rewards or pressures.

The curriculum's shift towards student-centered and experiential learning also contributed substantially to increased student engagement. Observational data and teacher reports revealed that students exhibited higher levels of both behavioral engagement such as attendance, participation, and on-task behavior and cognitive engagement, including deep processing, reflection, and critical thinking. These improvements suggest that the curriculum fosters a learning environment where students are not passive recipients of knowledge but active constructors of understanding. Project-based learning components, collaborative tasks, and real-world problem-solving scenarios embedded in the curriculum provided students with meaningful, relevant, and practical learning experiences. This relevance increased students' motivation by connecting academic content with their interests and future aspirations, thus making learning more purposeful. Furthermore, peer collaboration fostered a supportive social context that enhanced motivation through relatedness, another key component of Self-Determination Theory. Students felt a stronger sense of belonging and support, which further motivated them to engage deeply and persist through difficulties.

In addition to intrinsic motivation and engagement, the curriculum significantly bolstered students' self-efficacy—the belief in their ability to succeed in academic tasks. Students expressed greater confidence in their ability to set goals, plan their studies, and evaluate their progress. This finding is critical because self-efficacy has been shown to influence motivation by encouraging persistence and resilience in the face of academic challenges. The Independent Learning Curriculum's design, which encourages students to take responsibility for their learning processes, nurtures these self-regulatory skills and promotes a proactive learning mindset. The incremental successes students experienced as they completed projects or mastered concepts reinforced their belief in their own capabilities, creating a positive feedback loop that sustained motivation. Teacher interviews corroborated this trend, highlighting observed increases in students' willingness to take risks, ask questions, and seek help—all behaviors indicative of strong self-efficacy.

However, despite these positive impacts, the results also underscore several challenges that can moderate the curriculum's effectiveness in motivating students. A notable constraint was the uneven readiness of teachers to implement the curriculum's demands fully. While the curriculum's flexibility and emphasis on student autonomy offer great potential, they require teachers to adopt new pedagogical roles as facilitators and mentors rather than traditional instructors. Some educators reported feeling insufficiently prepared or supported to manage this transition, leading to inconsistencies in curriculum delivery and student experiences. This variability in implementation was particularly pronounced across different school settings, with rural and under-resourced schools facing greater difficulties due to limited access to training, learning materials, and technological infrastructure. These disparities potentially undermine the curriculum's motivational benefits for students in less advantaged contexts, highlighting the need for targeted professional development and resource allocation.

Additionally, some students initially struggled with the increased responsibility and independence that the curriculum demands. Students accustomed to teacher-directed instruction expressed feelings of uncertainty or anxiety when given greater freedom, which temporarily hindered motivation. This adjustment period indicates that while autonomy can enhance intrinsic motivation, it must be scaffolded carefully, especially for learners new to self-directed learning. Support mechanisms such as gradual introduction of autonomous tasks, explicit instruction in self-regulation strategies, and ongoing teacher guidance are essential to help students build the skills and confidence needed to thrive under the Independent Learning Curriculum. Cultural factors also emerged as an influential element affecting motivation outcomes. The traditional educational culture in many Indonesian schools, characterized by high respect for authority and emphasis on rote memorization, sometimes conflicted with the curriculum's student-centered approach. This cultural tension occasionally led to resistance or confusion among students, parents, and even educators, potentially diminishing the curriculum's motivational impact. Addressing these cultural dynamics requires thoughtful communication, community engagement, and the promotion of shared understanding about the benefits of learner autonomy and active engagement.

The research further highlighted the critical role of a supportive learning environment in maximizing the curriculum's motivational effects. Students who perceived their schools as encouraging, respectful, and resource-rich exhibited higher motivation levels. This finding aligns with motivation theories emphasizing the importance of relatedness and competence support alongside autonomy. Schools that foster positive relationships between teachers and students, provide timely feedback, and ensure access to adequate learning resources create conditions conducive to motivation and sustained academic effort. Conversely, environments lacking these supports may limit the curriculum's potential.

Overall, the findings affirm that the Independent Learning Curriculum, by promoting autonomy, engagement, and self-efficacy, holds substantial promise for enhancing student learning motivation in Indonesia. The curriculum addresses longstanding issues of student disengagement and passive learning by shifting the educational paradigm towards one that values student voice, choice, and active participation. The motivational benefits observed contribute not only to immediate academic outcomes but also to the development of lifelong learning habits and adaptive competencies needed in an increasingly complex world.

Nevertheless, the successful realization of these benefits depends on addressing the identified challenges related to teacher readiness, resource equity, cultural adaptation, and scaffolded support for students. Policymakers and educators must ensure comprehensive teacher training programs that equip educators with the skills and confidence to facilitate independent learning. Investments in infrastructure and instructional materials, especially in underserved areas, are necessary to provide all students with equal opportunities to benefit from the curriculum. Moreover, fostering a school culture that embraces innovation, student-centered values, and community involvement is essential to sustain motivation and engagement over time. In conclusion, this study underscores the transformative potential of the Independent Learning Curriculum in fostering student motivation through increased autonomy, meaningful engagement, and enhanced self-efficacy. While challenges remain, the evidence suggests that with adequate support and adaptation, the curriculum can significantly improve the motivational landscape of Indonesian education, paving the way for more effective and equitable learning experiences.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study conclusively demonstrate that the Merdeka Belajar curriculum has a significant and positive impact on student learning motivation by fostering greater autonomy, enhancing engagement, and strengthening self-efficacy. By shifting away from traditional, teacher-centered approaches toward a more flexible, student-centered framework, the curriculum effectively addresses some of the long-standing challenges of disengagement and passive learning that have characterized parts of the Indonesian education system. The increased autonomy granted to students allowing them to make choices about what, how, and at what pace they learn has been shown to cultivate intrinsic motivation, which is crucial for sustained academic effort and lifelong learning. Students under this curriculum reported higher levels of interest, curiosity, and satisfaction with their educational experiences, indicating that the curriculum's design aligns well with contemporary motivational theories that emphasize the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Moreover, the curriculum's emphasis on experiential and project-based learning has successfully increased student engagement by making learning more relevant, meaningful, and connected to real-life contexts. This active engagement, supported by collaborative activities and peer interactions, further enhances students' motivation and fosters a supportive learning community.

The development of self-efficacy is another critical outcome, as students gain confidence in their ability to manage their own learning, set goals, and overcome challenges, thereby reinforcing a positive cycle of motivation and achievement. However, the research also highlights important implementation challenges that can moderate the curriculum's effectiveness. These include uneven teacher preparedness, resource disparities across regions, and cultural barriers that sometimes hinder full adoption and consistent application of the curriculum's principles. Additionally, some students initially face difficulties adjusting to increased responsibility and independence in their learning process, underscoring the need for ongoing support and scaffolding. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive professional development for educators, equitable distribution of resources, and culturally sensitive strategies to foster acceptance and understanding among students, parents, and school communities. In conclusion, while the Merdeka Belajar curriculum holds substantial promise in transforming student motivation and learning outcomes in Indonesia, its success ultimately depends on the sustained commitment of policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to support effective implementation. By continuing to refine and adapt the curriculum with attention to local contexts and challenges, Indonesia can cultivate a more motivated, engaged, and self-directed generation of learners prepared to meet the demands of the 21st century.

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