

Research Article

Analysis of the Effectiveness of the Independent Curriculum in Increasing Learning Independence: A Comparative Study Between High School and Basic Education Levels

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in improving students' learning independence at high school and elementary school levels, with case studies at MAN 1 Ternate and MIN 1 Ternate. Using a qualitative approach, the research collected data through in-depth interviews, observations, documentation, and focus group discussions. The results showed significant differences in the level of learning independence between the two educational levels. High school students achieved an average learning independence score of 78.5%, while elementary students reached 62.7%. These differences were influenced by cognitive development factors, teacher readiness, and external support. High school students demonstrated better ability in planning learning, conducting independent learning, and evaluating learning outcomes. Meanwhile, elementary students required more intensive guidance but showed high enthusiasm in project-based learning. The research concludes that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum needs to be adapted to students' developmental characteristics at each educational level, emphasizing increased teacher readiness, especially at the elementary level, to maximize curriculum effectiveness in improving learning independence.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum; Learning Independence; Educational Level Differences

1. INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum is a new policy in Indonesian education that aims to provide flexibility to schools and teachers to design learning according to student needs. This curriculum is designed with a competency-based approach, which is not only oriented towards academic achievement but also character development, critical thinking skills, and student learning independence (MoEC, 2022). By applying the principle of flexibility, schools are given the freedom to choose the most effective learning methods to improve student engagement and learning outcomes. One of the flagship approaches of the Merdeka Curriculum is project-based learning, which is designed to encourage students to explore real problems and find solutions independently. (Adam, Fitrianto, et al., 2024)

This project-based learning approach integrates important aspects of 21st century learning, such as collaboration, communication, and creativity, while still focusing on developing independent learning. Through this method, students are invited to identify problems, develop solution strategies, and reflect on the results of their work. (Adiyana. Adam et al., 2023) This process not only helps students understand the learning material more deeply, but also encourages self-management skills that are essential for successful learning in various contexts (Cahyani & Abdul Aziz, 2023). In the long run, these abilities are expected to prepare students to face the challenges of an increasingly complex and technology-based world of work.

Learning independence, as one of the main elements in the Merdeka Curriculum, is very relevant in supporting modern learning. Students who have learning independence are able to take full responsibility for their learning process, from planning, implementing, to evaluating learning outcomes (Santrock, 2021). This ability not only improves academic outcomes but also prepares students to become lifelong learners who are able to face dynamic changes in the future. Therefore, learning independence has become a major concern in various educational reforms in the world, including in

Indonesia.

In a global context, the development of learning independence is also considered one of the essential competencies of the 21st century. (Adam, Sebe, et al., 2024) Various studies have shown that learning independence not only improves academic achievement but also builds interpersonal and intrapersonal skills needed to compete in the era of globalization (Usanto, 2023). Modern education, both at the primary and secondary levels, continues to encourage the implementation of learning methods that support the development of these abilities, in line with the Merdeka Curriculum's goal of creating adaptive, creative and innovative students. However, although various studies have highlighted the benefits of Merdeka Curriculum in increasing learning independence, there is still a research gap regarding its effectiveness at various levels of education. (Adiyana Adam, 2023) Most of the research has been conducted at one specific level, such as elementary or high school, which does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the differences in the implementation of this curriculum at various levels of education (Rachmawati, 2022). Given the significant differences in cognitive development and student learning needs at the elementary and high school levels, it is important to explore the comparative effectiveness of Merdeka Curriculum in increasing learning independence at both levels.

Although various studies have shown that Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to increase student learning independence (Cahyani & Abdul Aziz, 2023), its effectiveness at different levels of education has not been explored in depth. Previous research tends to focus only on one level of education, either at the elementary or high school level, so it does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the comparison of the implementation of this curriculum at both levels (Rachmawati, 2022). This narrow focus causes limitations in concluding the extent to which Merdeka Curriculum can effectively meet the learning needs of students at various levels of education (Agus, Nurrahma Asnawi, Adiyana Adam, 2023). In fact, there are significant differences in the characteristics of students at the elementary and high school levels. Elementary school students are at an early stage of cognitive development that is more oriented towards concrete learning, while high school students begin to enter the stage of abstract and critical thinking (Santrock, 2021). In addition, their learning needs are also different, where elementary students need a more structured approach, while high school students need more independent learning challenges to prepare for the transition to higher education or the world of work. This difference can certainly affect the effectiveness of the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum, especially in terms of developing learning independence (Adiyana Adam, Noviyanti Soleman, 2022).

Furthermore, the development of learning independence requires an approach that is tailored to the maturity level of students. In primary school students, project-based learning strategies may need to be designed with more intensive teacher support to help them understand the process of problem exploration. In contrast, for high school students, the same method can be modified to give students more freedom and responsibility in managing their projects. Therefore, research comparing the effectiveness of Merdeka Curriculum in this context becomes very relevant to provide more specific guidance for teachers and educational policy makers. The purpose of this research is to analyze the effectiveness of Merdeka Curriculum in increasing students' learning independence, focusing on the comparison between the high school and primary education levels. In this case, the research aims to understand the extent to which this curriculum is able to support the development of different learning independence skills according to the characteristics and needs of students at both levels of education. Specifically, the research will explore the implementation of project-based learning strategies, curriculum flexibility, and the role of teachers in supporting learning independence in elementary school students who have concrete learning needs as well as high school students who tend to be more independent and abstract.

Data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology indicates that by 2023, approximately 80% of schools in Indonesia will have adopted Merdeka Curriculum at various levels of education, including primary and upper secondary levels (MoEC, 2023). However, a preliminary survey by the National Education Standards Agency (BSNP) revealed that only 60% of teachers felt confident enough to implement project-based learning approaches to enhance students' learning independence (BSNP, 2023). This data indicates the challenges in ensuring the effectiveness of curriculum implementation, especially at education levels with diverse student characteristics.

A study by Setiawan and Rahayu (2023) showed that high school students developed critical thinking skills and learning independence faster than primary school students, but primary school students showed higher enthusiasm in project-based learning with intensive guidance. This shows that the level of education affects students' responses to the Merdeka Curriculum. Meanwhile, a survey by Wahyudi (2023) found that 70% of high school teachers found it easier to integrate project-based learning compared to only 45% of primary school teachers. This reflects the different levels of teacher readiness based on education level. The data generated by Setiawan and Rahayu (2023) shows that there are differences in student responses to the Merdeka Curriculum based on education level. High school students tend to develop critical thinking skills and learning independence more quickly, possibly due to their more mature level of cognitive development than elementary school students. However, the higher enthusiasm of primary school students in project-based learning, especially when they receive intensive guidance, indicates that a pedagogical approach that suits students'

developmental needs is very important in the successful implementation of this curriculum.

On the other hand, a survey by Wahyudi (2023) revealed that teacher readiness is also a key factor in the effective implementation of Merdeka Curriculum. High school teachers find it easier to integrate project-based learning than elementary school teachers, which suggests that teachers' experience or pedagogical competence may be more suitable for upper secondary education. It could also suggest that primary teachers need additional training or resources to support effective project-based learning. Both data underline that students' responses and teachers' readiness for the Merdeka Curriculum are influenced by the level of education, and this is one of the important factors that must be considered in curriculum evaluation and development. From the above data, it can be said that the effectiveness of Merdeka Curriculum in increasing students' learning independence differs between elementary and high school education levels. High school students show excellence in developing critical thinking skills and learning independence, while elementary school students have higher enthusiasm for project-based learning with intensive guidance. In addition, differences in teacher readiness to implement project-based learning also affect the results of implementing Merdeka Curriculum at each level. Therefore, approaches tailored to the specific needs of students and professional support for teachers are needed to optimize the effectiveness of this curriculum at all levels of education.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in increasing student learning independence at the primary and upper secondary education levels. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of implementing Merdeka Curriculum, especially the differences in challenges and opportunities at two different levels of education. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, documentation, and focus group discussions, which were thematically analyzed to identify patterns and comparisons between the two levels of education. (Abdussamad, H. Zuchri, and M. Si Sik, 2021)

The research was conducted at MAN 1 Ternate as a representation of the upper secondary education level and MIN 1 Ternate as a representation of the primary education level. Both institutions were chosen because they have actively implemented Merdeka Curriculum and have various project-based learning activities. This location was also chosen to get relevant representations related to curriculum implementation in the context of madrasah-based schools. The research subjects consisted of three main groups, namely teachers, students and madrasah principals from both research locations. Teachers who became subjects were those involved in the implementation of project-based learning, with a minimum number of five teachers from each institution. Students involved are grade XI students at MAN 1 Ternate and grade V students at MIN 1 Ternate, with a minimum of ten students each. The madrasah principals in both institutions are also key informants who provide information related to policies, support, and supervision of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation. The data collection technique in this study was carried out through four main methods (Fadilla, Annisa Rizky, and Putri Ayu Wulandari, 2023). First, in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, students, and madrasah principals to explore their perceptions, challenges, and experiences related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Second, classroom observations are carried out to directly observe the learning process, especially the application of project-based learning and indicators of student learning independence. Third, documentation is used to analyze documents such as lesson plans (RPP), evaluation records, and learning outcome reports. Fourth, focus group discussions are held with students to explore their collective experiences of project-based learning.

Data analysis techniques were conducted thematically to ensure the depth and accuracy of the analysis. The analysis process began with organizing the data from interviews, observations, and documentation, which were then coded using open coding techniques to identify key themes such as "teacher readiness," "student responses," "implementation challenges," and "learning independence indicators." The data were then organized into interconnected themes to illustrate the patterns that emerged in both research sites. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques, as well as through a member check process with informants to ensure accurate interpretation of the data. The results of this analysis are expected to provide comprehensive insights into the effectiveness of Merdeka Curriculum in increasing student learning independence at two different levels of education.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Description of Learning Independence Measurement Results at the High School and Elementary Levels

The measurement of students' learning independence in MAN 1 Ternate (high school level) and MIN 1 Ternate (elementary level) was conducted by referring to three main indicators, namely the ability to plan learning, carry out learning independently, and evaluate learning outcomes. Data were obtained through observations, interviews, and questionnaires

to students and teachers. From the questionnaire results, the level of learning independence of high school students reached an average of 78%, while that of elementary school students reached 65%. This difference indicates that high school students have a higher level of learning independence than elementary school students. The observation results show that high school students at MAN 1 Ternate are able to arrange study schedules independently and determine the priority of tasks that must be completed. As many as 85% of students stated that they were used to planning their study time with minimal support from teachers or parents. In contrast, primary school students at MIN 1 Ternate need more guidance from teachers or parents to develop study plans. Only about 45% of primary school students stated that they often determine their own study schedule. Based on the aspect of learning implementation, high school students show the ability to learn independently by utilizing various learning resources, such as books, modules, and online resources. Based on interviews, 70% of high school students admitted that they often look for additional references independently to understand the material taught in class. On the other hand, primary school students still depend on the materials provided by the teacher. Classroom observations show that only 40% of primary school students actively seek additional information beyond the materials provided.

The ability to evaluate learning outcomes also showed significant differences between the two levels of education. As many as 75% of high school students were able to identify weaknesses in their learning process and find solutions to improve it. This is supported by the application of the learning reflection method at the end of the learning session at MAN 1 Ternate. In contrast, at MIN 1 Ternate, primary students were more dependent on feedback from teachers to understand their mistakes. Only about 35% of primary school students independently reflected on their learning outcomes. Despite the significant difference in learning independence, primary students showed more enthusiasm for project-based learning than high school students. Teachers at MIN 1 Ternate reported that 90% of primary school students showed active engagement during the project, especially in activities involving creativity and group work. In contrast, high school students at MAN 1 Ternate showed 70% engagement in project-based learning, focusing more on the end result than the process. This difference reflects the influence of education level on students' learning independence pattern. High school students tend to have more mature cognitive abilities and learning experiences, so they are more capable of managing their learning independently. In contrast, primary school students need more guidance, but show high enthusiasm in learning when given interesting and relevant approaches. This data provides an initial picture of the effectiveness of implementing Merdeka Curriculum in building learning independence at both levels of education.

3.2. Analysis of Measurement Results of Learning Independence of High School Students

The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum at the high school level, especially at MAN 1 Ternate, shows significant results in increasing student learning independence. Based on the measurement results using indicators of learning independence (such as time management, decision making, and task completion), the average student score reaches 78.5 on a scale of 100. This shows that the majority of students have a fairly high ability to manage the learning process independently. The main factor influencing this result is the characteristics of high school students who are already at the formal operational stage of cognitive development, so they are better equipped to deal with tasks that require abstract thinking and complex problem solving (Santrock, 2021). The results of interviews with teachers show that the project-based learning method that characterizes Merdeka Curriculum succeeds in providing relevant challenges for high school students. The teacher stated that students were able to develop project work plans independently and showed initiative in finding additional learning resources. This is in line with Wahyudi's research (2023) which found that project-based learning at the high school level is more effective in increasing learning independence than traditional methods. However, there are some students who still need guidance in prioritizing tasks

In addition, students' involvement in the learning reflection process is also an important point in the development of learning independence. As many as 85% of students reported that reflection activities after the project helped them understand the strengths and weaknesses in the learning process. This proves that Merdeka Curriculum provides sufficient space for students to evaluate their learning independently, which is a key element in learning independence (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). Although these results are quite positive, there are several obstacles expressed by teachers. One of them is the lack of supporting resources, such as access to adequate literature or technological devices. This constraint can affect students' level of learning independence, especially for those who are not used to using technology as their main learning tool. Teachers also expressed the need for further training to help students who have difficulties in managing tasks independently. Another factor that supports increased learning independence is the supportive learning climate at MAN 1 Ternate. Teachers give students the freedom to choose project topics relevant to their interests, which directly increases motivation and a sense of responsibility for the task. This approach is in line with the findings of Setiawan and Rahayu (2023) who emphasized the importance of personalization in learning to support students'

independence. In conclusion, high school students at MAN 1 Ternate show a high level of learning independence through the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum. However, to achieve greater effectiveness, there needs to be attention to technical constraints and the need for more adequate resource support.

3.3. Analysis of the Results of Measuring Elementary Students' Learning Independence

At the primary education level, especially at MIN 1 Ternate, the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum also has a significant impact on students' learning independence, although the results are not as strong as at the high school level. Based on measurements using the same indicators, the average score of elementary school students' learning independence is 62.7 on a scale of 100. Although this score is still classified as moderate, it shows that students are starting to demonstrate the ability to manage the learning process independently, especially with intensive guidance from teachers. Teachers at MIN 1 Ternate reported that project-based learning at the primary level requires a more structured approach. Elementary students tend to need clear directions in each stage of the project to ensure they stay focused on the learning objectives. However, the level of student enthusiasm is very high. This shows that the project-based approach is able to attract students' attention and motivate them to learn more actively (Wahyudi, 2023).

Elementary students' learning independence is mostly seen in the management of simple tasks, such as organizing daily schedules or completing group projects. However, their ability to make decisions independently is still low. Teachers state that students often rely on direct instruction to determine the next step. This is in line with Piaget's cognitive development theory which states that elementary school students are still at the concrete operational stage, so they need support in abstract thinking (Santrock, 2021). An important factor that supports the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools is parental involvement. Based on the survey results, 75% of parents of MIN 1 Ternate students actively accompany their children in the project-based learning process at home. This support is very helpful in building students' learning independence, although it is still in its early stages. However, some parents' lack of understanding of the concept of Merdeka Curriculum is a challenge in creating an ideal learning environment at home. Teachers also reported that the main obstacle in developing students' learning independence is the limited time to provide individualized guidance. With a relatively large number of students in one class, teachers find it difficult to provide adequate attention to each student, especially for those who need more intensive guidance.

Overall, the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum at MIN 1 Ternate has succeeded in increasing students' enthusiasm for learning and building a foundation for learning independence. However, the level of effectiveness still needs to be improved through more intensive teacher training and increased parental involvement in the learning process. The research results show that there is a significant difference between the level of learning independence of high school and elementary school students involved in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Based on the analysis of the data obtained, high school students at MAN 1 Ternate showed higher learning independence scores compared to elementary school students at MIN 1 Ternate. The average learning independence score of high school students reached 78.5, while elementary school students only reached 62.7. The t-test conducted showed that this difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the level of learning independence of high school students is higher than that of primary school students.

This difference can be explained by various factors that affect students' cognitive development and ability to manage their learning process. One of the main factors is the age and stage of cognitive development of students. Based on Piaget's developmental theory, high school students are at a formal operational stage, which allows them to think abstractly, plan, and make decisions independently in completing more complex tasks. In contrast, elementary school students are still at a concrete operational stage, which means they rely more on direct instruction and guidance from teachers in managing their learning. Therefore, although the Independent Curriculum provides opportunities for both to learn independently, different levels of cognitive readiness lead to differences in recorded levels of learning independence. In addition, external support factors also influence the differences in learning independence between the two groups. At the high school level, students are often encouraged to develop independent learning habits early on, both at school and at home. Many high school students already have skills in managing time and tasks independently, which affects the effectiveness of project-based learning in the Merdeka Curriculum. In contrast, elementary students need more guidance from teachers and parents to achieve optimal levels of learning independence. This indicates that although the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to increase learning independence at various levels, the support given to elementary students still needs improvement for more effective learning.

Parental involvement also plays an important role in the differences in learning independence between high school and elementary students. At the elementary level, 75% of parents are actively involved in accompanying their children in project-based learning. However, parental involvement at the high school level tends to be more limited as students are

more independent in managing their learning. Nevertheless, research results show that parental involvement in elementary school has a positive impact, although not as significant as the impact experienced by high school students who have higher learning independence. Besides cognitive factors and external support, differences in teacher readiness in implementing project-based learning also influence students' level of learning independence. High school teachers feel more prepared and confident in integrating this approach into their teaching, while elementary school teachers feel less confident, with only 45% considering themselves ready. Teacher readiness in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is important, as teachers play a role in providing the direction and support needed by students to develop their learning independence.

Overall, the differences in learning independence levels between high school and elementary students can be explained by factors of cognitive development, student readiness in managing learning independently, and support from the external environment, both teachers and parents. Although the Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for students at both levels to develop learning independence, differences in these factors cause significant variations in the recorded results. The results of this study indicate a significant difference in learning autonomy between high school (SMA) and elementary school (SD) students, which aligns with educational theories emphasizing cognitive development appropriate to their age. Piaget (1972), in his theory of cognitive development, stated that high school students, who are in the formal operational stage, are capable of abstract thinking and can plan and make decisions independently. This is reflected in the research findings showing that high school students have higher learning autonomy scores compared to elementary students, who are still in the concrete operational stage and tend to rely more on direct instruction. Research by Santrock (2021) also supports this, demonstrating that adolescents, such as those in high school, possess the ability to learn more independently, making them better prepared to face project-based learning challenges present in the Merdeka Curriculum.

Additionally, research by Setiawan and Rahayu (2023) also found that high school students tend to develop critical thinking skills and learning autonomy more quickly compared to elementary school students, who require more intensive guidance. These findings reinforce the results of this study, indicating that although the Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for developing learning autonomy at both levels, its effectiveness is significantly influenced by the higher cognitive readiness of high school students. On the other hand, the differences in teacher readiness at the high school and elementary levels are also reflected in this research. Wahyudi (2023) revealed that high school teachers feel more confident in implementing project-based learning, while elementary teachers face greater challenges. This indicates that, in addition to student readiness, teacher preparedness plays a crucial role in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which aligns with this study's findings showing a gap in project-based learning application between the two educational levels.

The results of this study have important implications for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in efforts to enhance student learning autonomy across various educational levels. These findings emphasize the importance of adjusting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum based on educational stages, as elementary students still require more intensive guidance, while high school students are more capable of independent learning. Therefore, educational policies aimed at increasing learning autonomy must consider differences in cognitive development stages and tailor teaching approaches to fit their abilities and needs. At the elementary level, this study reveals that although the Merdeka Curriculum encourages project-based learning, elementary students need greater support from teachers and parents to enhance their learning autonomy. Consequently, developing more comprehensive training for elementary teachers to implement project-based learning could be a significant solution. Elementary teachers should be trained not only to apply these methods but also to provide more concrete guidance during the learning process so that students can engage more actively in independent learning. Meanwhile, at the high school level, although students are better prepared for project-based learning, challenges still exist regarding teacher readiness. This research shows that while many high school teachers are more confident, there are still some who require additional support in using project-based learning methods. Therefore, ongoing training for high school teachers on how to effectively manage project-based learning needs to be strengthened, focusing on developing teachers' skills in supporting student learning autonomy.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis results in this study, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum positively impacts enhancing student learning autonomy at both high school and elementary levels. However, there is a striking difference between these two educational levels regarding its effectiveness. High school students demonstrate a higher level of learning autonomy compared to elementary students. This is attributed to the more mature cognitive development of high school students, allowing them to manage their learning processes independently, including in

project-based learning that is central to the Merdeka Curriculum. On the other hand, although elementary students show high enthusiasm for project-based learning, lower teacher readiness in implementing this approach at this level presents a unique challenge. Elementary students require more intensive guidance from teachers to achieve optimal levels of learning autonomy. Therefore, teacher readiness at the elementary level becomes an essential factor influencing the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in primary education. Overall, this study highlights the importance of adjusting teaching approaches according to student developmental characteristics at each educational level. Specific strategies and greater support for teachers, especially at the elementary level, are needed to maximize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Thus, these research findings can contribute to education policymakers in designing more effective policies aimed at enhancing student learning autonomy across all educational levels in Indonesia.

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