

A Comprehensive Understanding of Vocational Students' Engagement in The Merdeka Curriculum: A Preliminary Study

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menyajikan pemahaman yang komprehensif tentang bagaimana keterlibatan siswa Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan dan mengeksplorasi berbagai faktor yang mempengaruhi keterlibatan siswa dalam implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka terhadap keterlibatan siswa di Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan dalam mengoptimalkan kemampuan siswa melalui pembelajaran praktik. Dalam mengumpulkan dan menganalisis data, penelitian ini menggunakan Systematic Literature Review (SLR) untuk mengidentifikasi literatur yang relevan melalui database dan ditentukan berdasarkan kriteria yang telah ditentukan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan siswa ditentukan oleh pemahaman guru terhadap konsep Kurikulum Merdeka yang mempengaruhi strategi pembelajaran yang digunakan untuk merancang proses pembelajaran. Selain itu, fleksibilitas dan kebebasan dalam konsep penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka yang diberikan kepada guru menjadi faktor lain yang mendukung partisipasi siswa selama proses pembelajaran. Oleh karena itu, disimpulkan bahwa keterlibatan siswa ditentukan oleh bagaimana guru mampu mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka dengan baik. Penelitian ini menyarankan bahwa optimalisasi student engagement dapat dilakukan melalui desain proses pembelajaran yang disesuaikan dengan kebutuhan dan minat siswa sesuai dengan kejuruannya.

Kata Kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka, Keterlibatan Siswa, Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan

Abstract

This research presents a comprehensive understanding of how Vocational High School students are engaged and explores the various factors that affect student engagement in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. It aims to examine the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum on student engagement at Vocational High School in optimizing student abilities through practical learning. In collecting and analyzing data, this research used Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to identify relevant literature through databases and was determined based on predetermined criteria. The results showed that student engagement is determined by teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum's concept which affects the learning strategies used to design the learning process. In addition, the flexibility and freedom in the concept of implementing a Merdeka Curriculum given to teachers is another factor to support student participation during the learning process. Therefore, it is concluded that student engagement is determined by how the teacher is able to implement the independent curriculum properly. This research suggested that optimizing student engagement can be done through the design of learning process adjusted to the needs and interests of students based on their vocations.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, Students Engagement, Vocational High School

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2022, the Merdeka Curriculum has been the subject of several literature studies. Its application allows for flexibility in designing the curriculum according to the particular needs of the school. Emphasis is placed on promoting independent learning and utilizing technology to facilitate the learning process. In this case, having a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum to create effective learning tools that address the characteristics of their students is important (Nadrah, 2023).

The Indonesian government has made several changes regarding the implementation of curriculum in education. The curriculum implementation that implemented before the Merdeka Curriculum was the 2013 Curriculum. Amanda, et al (2023) state that enhancing emotional wealth, productivity, creativity and innovation through a thorough analysis of their attitudes, skills and knowledge is the main objective of the 2013 curriculum. Coaching and training in the scope of knowledge, skills and attitudes in the educational process are the main concepts in this curriculum.

The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum is an effort to restore the educational process, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (Rizaldi & Fatimah 2022; Nurmasiyah, et.al., 2023). As the pandemic has impacted Indonesian education (Siahaan, 2020), the learning process has changed significantly where the learning process is conducted from home. Certainly, teachers faced challenges in adapting online-based learning (Noval, et al., 2022). However, after the pandemic, the teachers must be able to adapt to the current situation so that the learning process continues and the previously set goals are optimally achieved. The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to be flexible and adaptable, with a focus on student-centered learning that promotes the development of character, creativity, critical thinking skills, academic knowledge, as well as independent learning and critical thinking (Zidan, 2023).

Empirical research on curriculum implementation shows that The Merdeka Curriculum is applied at numerous levels of education, ranging from primary school to college. At the elementary school level, education units and teachers are given the flexibility to design school operational curricula and teaching modules to facilitate learning according to students' competency levels (Lubis & Priyadi, 2022). In addition, the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented at Vocational High Schools (SMK). Through the program run by the Vocational High School (SMK), it is expected to be able to bring the world closer to the professional world of work. This is collaborated with the business or the industrial world (the world of work). Thus, it is expected to be able to produce competent graduates in accordance with their expertise and competencies. Accordingly, this concept is in line with the principle of the Merdeka curriculum designed to be more flexible and adaptable according to student's needs. (Zidan, 2023). regarding the learning content of the curriculum oriented towards high-quality education is the best practice of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Vocational High Schools (Kamila & RM, 2023).

Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Vocational High Schools (SMK) is a noteworthy phenomenon. Previous research has examined the correlation of student learning achievement on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Aji, 2023). Additionally, this curriculum is also inseparable from the use of educational technology as an innovative approach to build student potential (Junarti, 2023; Sulaiman, 2024). The use of this technology is a learning media that can be used in efforts to develop effective and interesting English learning (Fauzi, 2024). In research, Lastari et al.

(2024) revealed that the use of technology as a medium can assist students in improving their abilities in specific skills. The current existing studies analyze the learning outcomes of the Merdeka Curriculum. However, they do not address how the curriculum accommodates the needs and interests of various students, particularly those in Vocational High Schools (SMK), who are interested in practical learning.

The implementation of this curriculum in Vocational High School is expected to be an effective learning solution applicable to students interested in practical learning. It is due to the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on hands-on and independent learning encouraging students to engage more in practical activities and problem-solving tasks. This curriculum also provides a learning environment helping them feel more comfortable and confident in expressing their ideas and opinions (Ferdaus & Dian, 2023). This curriculum allows students to increase their involvement that in turn can facilitate and accommodate their diverse needs and interests. In practical learning, the instruction given by the teacher to the students to do something make the students actively involved and explore various resources to increase their knowledge (Saraswati, et al., 2022)

According to previous research on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, one of the focuses that needs to be further discussed is the exploration regarding how the Merdeka Curriculum is able to accommodate the diverse needs and interests of students. This is especially relevant for vocational school students who tend to be more interested in practical learning and may require increased involvement during the learning process. In vocational schools, the focus is on improving practical skills in specific fields. According to Hidayatullah and Qomariyah (2022), besides knowledge, communication with students is one of the success factors in the learning process. Therefore, it is important to ensure that students engaged in the learning process actively. Meanwhile, teachers still have difficulties in overcoming low student participation during the learning process (Ningsih, et al., 2023). Teachers are required to be creative and innovative in creating an effective classroom atmosphere. Thus, students are expected to be actively involved in learning. Meanwhile, it is important for teachers to have a good understanding of the independent learning approach and to master the IT skills required by the Merdeka Curriculum in high schools (Nadrah, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum can assist school officials in identifying the level of student engagement and measuring the success of achieving learning goals. Therefore, this research aims to examine the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum on student engagement at Vocational High Schools to accommodate the diverse needs and interests of students, as well as the interest of students in practical learning. Through the implementation of this curriculum, it is expected to be able to achieve learning objectives in the goals set by teachers with student-centered learning. The significance of this research lies in exploring student engagement through the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Vocational High Schools (SMK). In addition, the findings from this study are able to contribute to improving the quality of education, especially in empowering students

RESEARCH METHOD

The chosen design for this study is a systematic literature review (SLR). It is a type of literature review collecting multiple research findings or articles through a systematic process and critically analyzes them (Benito, 2016). The objective is to get a clear picture concerning the student's engagement in the context of Merdeka curriculum through the dynamic of current studies. This review mainly focuses on

exploring student engagement through the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Vocational High Schools (SMK) obtained through literature searches on relevant databases. The subjects of this study are relevant articles obtained from the screening results of international and national literature searches based on predetermined inclusion criteria and conducted through connectedpapers.com databases. The literature search was conducted in April and Mei 2024 using three databases, DOAJ, OPEN KNOWLEDGE MAPS, Openread and Semantic Scholar. Article search has been found through keywords: “Merdeka Curriculum”, “Merdeka Curriculum and Vocational High School”, “Vocational High School and Students’ Engagement”. The search has resulted in eight articles that meet the specified inclusion criteria. Data collection is carried out through the process of searching the literature through databases and filtering articles in accordance with predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Formulating the list of inclusion and exclusion criteria makes it possible to specifically answer the research question and clearly define the boundaries of the review (Siddaway, et al., 2018). So, the inclusion and exclusion criteria will be the main instrument in this study. The inclusion criteria are article should be addressing students’ engagement at vocational high school in the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum. The data in this study was analyzed through PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). The first step used in determining which studies to include in this research was selection or screening through title and abstract in accordance with the inclusion criteria. After reading the title and abstract, the researcher conducted an in-depth analysis by reading the full text. The articles focused on student engagement in the implementation of the independent curriculum in Vocational High School. A total of 974 studies were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, resulting in 8 studies that continued to the next stage to be used as objects in the study.

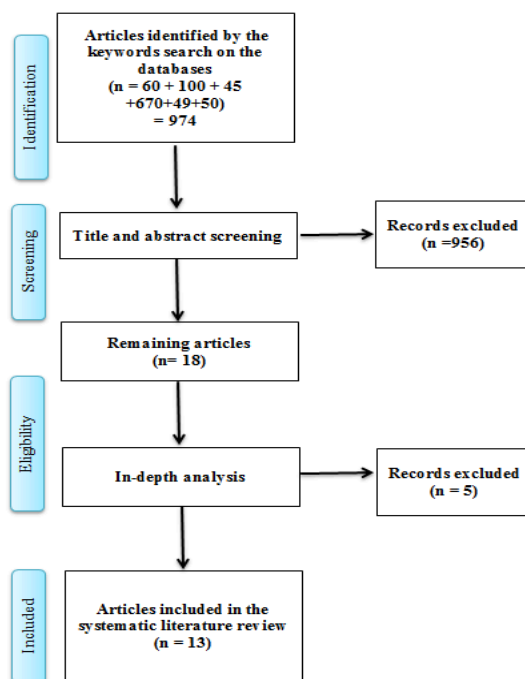


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of systematic review.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review was based on 13 articles included in this research which discussed the engagement of Vocational High School students' in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, either in the form of research results or conference results. The following is a mapping table of the results of the literature review.

Table 1. Metadata of Selected Article

No	Writer	Year	Research Design	Data Collection Method	The Form
1	Abdul Muin Sibuea, Muhammad Amin, Bima Mustaqim, Ginagor Tumanggo	2023	qualitative	questionnaires	Peer-review article
2	Shinta Amalia Ferdaus, Dian Novita	2023	qualitative	observations and semi-structured interviews	Peer-review article
3	Wafa' Qaulan Syahida & Siminto	2023	qualitative	collecting several references, such as books, articles, and other related sources	Peer-review article
4	Aulia Putri Rahmawati & Etika Dewi	2024	qualitative	interview, observation, and documentation	Peer-review article
5	Kusumaningtyas Ainin Sofiya Septiana, Festi Himatu Karima, & Prita Nusanti	2023	quantitative	questionnaires	Peer-review article
6	Nur Amalia, Jamaluddin Arifin & Lukman Ismail	2023	qualitative	interview, observation, and documentation	Peer-review article
7	Adolf Bastian, M. Firdaus, & Ramanda Rizky*	2023	quantitative	questionnaires and observations	Peer-review article
8	Yoto, Marsono, Agus Suyetno, Puteri Ardista Nursisda Mawangi, Achmad Romadin and Paryono	2024	Mix method	interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and questionnaires	Peer-review article

9	Hendi Firdaus, Encep Syarifudin, & Cucu Atikah	2023	qualitative	collecting several references, such as books, articles, and other related sources	Peer-review article
10	Miftahul Rahmi, Merika Setiawati, Fajri Basyirun, & Hendri Irawan	2023	quantitative	questionnaires	Peer-review article
11	Made Arya Astina, Ketut Tri Budi Artani, Helmy Syakh Alam	2023	qualitative	FGD	Article of conference proceedings
12	Putri Khoirin Nashiroh, & Wahyu Nur Hidayat	2024	qualitative	documentation, observations, interviews, and tests.	Article of conference proceedings
13	Anita Kusuma Pertiwi, & Ririn Pusparini	2021	qualitative	questionnaires & semi-structured interview.	Peer-review article

In this results section, it describes student engagement through implementing Merdeka Curriculum in Vocational High Schools (SMK). Rahmi et al. (2023), stated one of the important components in increasing student engagement is the understanding that teachers have of the Merdeka Curriculum concept. This is in accordance with the results of his research which shows that student involvement is in line with the teacher's understanding of the implementation of an independent curriculum in learning, such as understanding learning outcomes (CP), preparing learning objectives (TP) to planning learning. This is the main component in increasing student involvement In line with the results of research found by Firdaus (2023) which states that the learning model used by teachers also has an influence in efforts to achieve learning objectives according to the concept of the Merdeka Curriculum. According to Astina, (2023) the teacher is the central figure that will drive the success of students' achievement. One of them is through a student-centered learning approach to ensure that students are actively involved in learning.

In this study, the results show that the engagement of students in vocational high schools (SMK) in implementing the Merdeka curriculum is influenced by the techniques used by teachers during learning. In the research article conducted by Ferdaus & Novita (2022), the teachers use small group discussion techniques that attract students to become active participants. According to Amalia (2023), the learning applied in the vocational high school is project-based learning. The used of project-based learning in the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to involve students in the learning process. This is proven by previous research which states that the implementation of project-based learning (PjBL) has participated the students in project-based learning activities in English learning (Septiana, et al., 2023). In addition, research conducted by Rahmawati & Kusumaningtyas (2024) at SMK, found that the use of media in the implementation of the PjBL method is a media used in the learning

process. The use of media is able to make students more actively involved and can explore their abilities through projects assigned by teachers. In line with Sibuea, et al (2023) found that from the indicators of input evaluation results in SMK Center of Excellence, the parties involved can collaborate well in learning, and students' responses in the learning process have shown positive developments and responses. Meanwhile, based on research conducted by Nashiroh and Hidayat (2024), the implementation of direct practice is able to support student involvement during the learning process.

On the other hand, in Syahida and Siminta (2023), the flexibility of independent curriculum helps teachers in designing the learning according to the interests and needs of SMK students who are closely related to the industrial world. As a result, student engagement in learning will increase because it is designed to meet the needs of students in the world of work. Pertiwi and Pusparini study (2021), based on the results of their research, also supports that in their curriculum concept which gives teachers the freedom to choose strategies and methods that will provide space for students to explore. In addition, the freedom given to schools is able to create a school environment in line with work culture, or commonly referred to as "industrial culture". This is consistent with the research findings. The research conducted by Yoto, et al. (2024) found that flexibility, which is the main concept in the implementation of this independent curriculum, is a plus point to be applied in Vocational High School. This is because the school can adapt the curriculum according to the needs of the industry, so that the competencies produced are in line with the demands of the world of work. This will be the main attraction for students to increase their motivation to learn and be actively involved in the learning process. This is in line with the opinion of Bastian, et al. (2023), which states that one of the things that causes the effectiveness of student participation is dependent on student interest in the learning process.

Teachers' understanding of the concept of Merdeka Curriculum is an essential element to engage students in the learning process. The abilities and skills possessed by teachers have a strategic role in creating active and creative learning (Hilmi & Summiyani, 2023). This will affect how the teacher will implement the curriculum appropriately in the learning process. As stated by Fitriyah et al. (2022) that planning the innovative and creative learning design can increase students' interest and motivation on learning, teachers need to have a good understanding of the concept of Merdeka Curriculum. Moreover, the teacher requires to understand the transformations are entrenched in the new curriculum. Nurzen's (2022) demonstrated how teachers with a good understanding of the curriculum concept are able to achieve learning objectives and outcomes following the principles of its implementation. This understanding includes creating student-centered learning and adapting instructional materials to student needs to increase student participation and engagement. Thus, one of the conditions for the success of student participation in the implementation of an Merdeka Curriculum is the teacher's understanding of the independent curriculum. Teachers who have a good understanding on the concepts and principles of the Merdeka Curriculum will implement it appropriately. Furthermore, this understanding will have an impact on learning design. through a good understanding, the teacher will use the right method so that students will actively participate in learning. According to Azzahra, et, al, (2022) states that the learning process in the independent curriculum must be designed with an interactive and relevant model.

The results in this study indicate that the learning strategy employed by the teacher may influence student engagement during the learning process. Every learning

method applied must be tailored to the needs of students and be able to encourage the active participation of each student (Fauzan, et al., 2023). Therefore, in learning, it is expected that teachers are able to apply student-centered learning. In line with the opinion of Ingtias, et al (2022) which states that the application of student-centered learning is expected to increase the ability of students to be comprehensive and ready to work. Learning integrated with the Pancasila Student Profile is an effort made by the government in motivating student contributions (Rohimajaya & Hamer, 2023). The implementation of these learning strategies is also expected to contribute to the creation of an engaging learning environment and to enhance the student engagement levels (Marwaeni & Ningsih, 2023). As stated by Yunita and Widodo (2023) in their research, in an effort to involve students in learning, the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum can be applied through the application of the simulation method. This learning allows students to apply their understanding of learning materials in real situations through simulations. Thus, the learning process in the independent curriculum will be oriented towards the engagement of students throughout the learning experience. This perspective aligns with the findings of Amiruddin, et al. (2023), which indicate that the learning activities in the independent curriculum are primarily student-centered. Based on the findings in this research and supported by several studies above, it can be concluded that the strategies implemented by teachers also have an impact on student engagement. Of course, the use of these strategies should be tailored to the students' needs, practical activities applied in real-life situations, and integrated into the Pancasila Student Profile. This will create student-centered learning, which in turn affects students' cognitive abilities.

Furthermore, this research also highlights the concept of a flexible and independent curriculum, which allows schools to adapt their teaching to the industrial world or workforce. Through this concept, it is expected that teachers will be able to develop practical skills in accordance with their vocational expertise program. Especially in Vocational High School, both teachers and principals have the opportunity to adjust learning according to the needs and developments of the industrial world. This is in accordance with the opinion of Rawenda and Nirwanto (2023) who state that through the concept of freedom given to teachers, through the implementation of this independent curriculum, teachers focus on developing relevant competencies and preparing students according to the demands of the labor market. It is certainly expected that students will be able to be actively involved during the learning process and optimize their abilities practically. As explained in the results of research conducted by Latifah, et al., (2024) stated that the Merdeka Curriculum which implement in SMK is able to optimize and develop professional students in accordance with their respective expertise programs. So, the flexibility and freedom referred to is that the organizers of educational institutions (schools) have full authority or freedom to explore in designing the learning process with their respective objectives in accordance with the principle of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, namely optimizing student involvement (Ndari, et al., 2023; Munira & Suryana, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Research on understanding the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum on student engagement at Vocational High Schools (SMK) is an effort to increase student participation during the learning process to develop their knowledge through student activities during the learning process. This student activity refers to practical learning and application of theoretical knowledge in skills. Student engagement through these

activities allows students to increase their knowledge and develop their vocational competencies. This research shows the aspects that will influence the engagement of Vocational High School students during learning. Understanding the concepts and principles of implementing the independent curriculum in learning depends on how teachers understand this curriculum and implement it through learning design. In addition, based on the findings in this study, it shows that the concept of flexibility and freedom in the concept of implementing an independent curriculum to teachers is a freedom given so that teachers are able to adjust the learning process according to student needs. Thus, it will attract students to be actively involved and optimize their involvement to develop knowledge and skills practically. To increase student engagement can be done through learning design adjusted to the competency needs in each vocational. Therefore, the implication of this research is to highlight the optimization of student engagement during the learning process through the use of learning designs arranged by teachers' understanding of curriculum concepts to develop Vocational High School students' competencies accordance to the needs of industry and the world of work.

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