

The Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum: Impact Toward Students' Learning Outcomes at Islamic Middle School

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Article Info

Article history:

Received June 27, 2025

Revised August 30, 2025

Accepted September 03, 2025

Keywords:

English Language Learning;

Learning Outcomes;

Merdeka Belajar;

Self-Determination Theory.

ABSTRACT

This study intends to analyze the implementation of the Independent Curriculum and its impact on the learning outcomes of eighth-grade students in English at Islamic Middle School. This study uses a qualitative approach with data collection techniques through classroom observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. This research was conducted at the Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang. Data analysis was carried out using Michael Fullan's theory of educational change and Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a theoretical framework. The findings of the study indicate that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the madrasah has entered a solid implementation stage and is starting to move towards institutionalization. Teachers carry out differentiated learning, provide assignment choices, and create a learning environment that supports students' autonomy, competence, and social connectedness. As a result, students experience improved learning outcomes that cover three main domains: a) Cognitive domain: increased critical thinking skills, problem-solving, and in-depth conceptual understanding through contextual tasks and authentic assessments; b) Affective domain: the growth of intrinsic learning motivation, self-confidence, and a sense of responsibility for the learning process; c) Psychomotor domain: the development of presentation skills, collaborative work, and the production of creative work in various learning projects. This study recommends the need to strengthen teacher capacity and provide institutional support to maintain the consistent and sustainable implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is essential to establishing a superior, independent, character-driven culture. Education is crucial to national development because it creates high-quality, adaptable, and competitive people resources (Shavkidinova et al., 2023). Success in education is measured by students' learning outcomes, which show how well the educational process turns potential into real-world skills (Shah, 2019; Gardner et al.,

2023). Cognitive, affective, psychomotor, critical thinking, teamwork, and character outcomes are included. Indonesia's education system remains problematic. Educational inequality, distant access, and the lack of contextual learning approaches continue to hinder student learning (Karim, 2021; Rafsanjani & Rozaq, 2024). Many schools, particularly Islamic Boarding School, have not fully incorporated 21st-century learning approaches (Asror et al., 2023). A school study found that teachers' Merdeka Belajar knowledge is poor and that inadequate learning facilities hinder project-based and individualized learning approaches (Haq, 2024; Prayitno & Mahmudi, 2025). Thus, pupils are docile, unmotivated, and lack critical thinking, communication, and teamwork abilities.

Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced the Merdeka Curriculum to solve these issues. This curriculum gives students freedom to learn and teachers flexibility to create more meaningful, relevant, and contextually appropriate learning experiences (Ndari & Mahmudah, 2023; Fauzan et al., 2023; Wasehudin et al., 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, Pancasila Student Profile character development, and essential competency development through individualized instruction, project-based learning, and formative evaluation (Utami et al., 2025).

Philosophically, the Merdeka Curriculum makes pupils active learners. Constructivist learning requires pupils to build their own knowledge from real-world experiences (Kumayas et al., 2025). Instead of imparting knowledge, teachers facilitate. This method promotes student interest, accountability, and independence, which improves learning results. But implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in schools is difficult. Many teachers struggle to grasp and apply this curriculum's new methods (Sholeh et al., 2024; Kumayas et al., 2025). Limited training, a lack of knowledge of evaluation as learning, and a weak collaborative learning culture contribute to these issues. Thus, lectures, memorization, and summative evaluations still dominate learning, which is ineffective at developing 21st-century skills (Pellegrino, 2017).

Educational change involves teachers' actions and thoughts, not only policies: "Educational change is as simple and complex as teachers' actions and thoughts." Teachers are crucial curriculum implementers. Without sufficient knowledge, skills, and motivation to apply the Merdeka Curriculum, educational goals will not be met and students' learning outcomes will stagnate (Nastiti et al., 2024; Rusliana, 2024). In this setting, student learning outcomes are vital for evaluating Merdeka Curriculum implementation. The curriculum's ultimate purpose is to help students "understand the content" and think critically, solve issues, communicate eloquently, collaborate, and have strong character (Mustoip et al., 2024). Numerous studies show a discrepancy between curriculum aims and classroom realities. Many kids lack comprehension, confidence in expressing viewpoints, and teamwork and reflective thinking skills (Soto, 2017; Alvunger, 2021).

Still, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is crucial to the formation of future national curricula (Hadi et al., 2023; Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024). This curriculum is a transitional step toward a more dynamic, adaptive, and context-based curriculum tailored to

individual educational institutions. Studies and assessments of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum practices in the field help the government and educational institutions build a more inclusive, relevant, and sustainable curriculum. This research is important for academic purposes and for shaping national education policy.

Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang, a boarding-based madrasah, has maintained “A” accreditation for two consecutive years and has adequate facilities like computer labs, a library, Wi-Fi access, and a well-organized dormitory system. According to preliminary observations and interactions with instructors and students, Merdeka Curriculum implementation remains difficult. Teachers are still struggling with differentiated instruction and project-based learning. Low student engagement and poor learning outcomes, especially in English, persist. Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang has various social, cultural, and academic origins. They are from diverse South Sulawesi regions and have varied learning styles and preparation. In this setting, a homogeneous educational strategy fails to meet student needs. Differentiated education ensures that students learn according to their readiness, interest, and learning style, says Tomlinson. Without adaptable and flexible tactics, kids' potential will decrease.

Additionally, Islamic boarding schools bring unique challenges. Students learn religion and character in the dorms as well as academically. To keep students motivated and mentally healthy, flexible and engaging educational strategies are needed to balance a busy schedule, worship, and extracurriculars (Tawakkal et al., 2025). Teachers in such situations must go beyond subject delivery to provide engaging, relevant learning experiences that support students' complete growth (Lever, 2017). Based on the preceding explanation, students' learning results are an important indicator of Merdeka Curriculum implementation, especially in pesantren-based schools like Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang. The institution has a solid basis, but it needs to improve curriculum-aligned instruction. Thus, this study investigates how this madrasah implements the Merdeka Curriculum and how it affects student learning.

This study is expected to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and the reinforcement of existing theories in the field of education, especially concerning the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Furthermore, the findings are anticipated to provide a valuable reference for other researchers or future studies in developing hypotheses for similar research, thus enhancing the overall research outcomes.

2. METHOD

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive approach. This approach relies on descriptive language, incorporates detailed perspectives from participants, and is conducted in a natural environment. The goal of this research is to collect the accurate information and to understand the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum and its impact on students' learning outcomes at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang. This research examined the description of the implementation of the

Merdeka Belajar Curriculum and its impact on students' learning outcomes at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang. The study examined the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum and its effects on students' learning outcomes in English for grades VIII.1 and VIII.4 at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang.

The research data was gathered through observations, interviews, and documentation. In this study, the observational data focuses on how English teachers implement the Merdeka Curriculum during the teaching and learning activities in VIII grade. The researcher recorded field notes based on the observations. The observations focused on how the Merdeka Curriculum was applied, including the teaching strategies, student participation, instructional media, and techniques employed by the teacher throughout the learning process. In this study, interviews also served as one of the data sources. The researcher recorded the result of interviews with the English teacher at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang in written form, based on the information provided by the teacher. Additionally, the researcher also collected data from various documents that could support the research.

The primary data sources used in this study consist of all the data gathered from interviews with informants, including the school principal, two English teachers, and 25 students from grades VIII.1 and VIII.4. These serve as data sources for the impact of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang. The primary instrument in qualitative research is the researcher, who must possess sufficient skills to conduct the study effectively. This study collected data through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The researcher observed English teachers to examine the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and its impact on English language teaching and learning. In-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including teachers, the head of the madrasah, and students, to explore their perspectives and experiences regarding the curriculum. The data collection process was guided by an interview guide, an observation sheet, and a documentation checklist to maintain consistency and focus.

A comprehensive overview of the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum within the English classroom is provided, encompassing the following components: a) Initiation stage b) Implementation stage c) Institutionalization stage. The researchers employed a variety of methods to gather data in this study, including observation, interviews, and documentation.

The data analysis stage is the most complex part of research, where researchers are required to combine information collected from multiple sources to produce a comprehensive explanation of research findings. In this research, the data analysis follows the model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which involves three activities conducted simultaneously: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions and verification. The conclusion drawing was guided by the focus of the research, namely analyzing the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum and its impact on students' learning outcomes, and was grounded in Fullan's framework of educational

change as well as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the analytical foundation. Accordingly, the conclusions generated represent a synthesis of the main verified findings, systematically formulated as answers to the research questions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings are presented thematically based on the results of field data analysis gathered from classes VIII.1 and VIII.4 and are supported by direct quotations from the informants to strengthen the researcher's interpretation. Through this approach, it is expected that a comprehensive and in-depth picture of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation process and its influence on students' learning outcomes can be conveyed, in accordance with the educational context of the madrasah environment.

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang

In an effort to examine the implementation of the Merdeka belajar Curriculum, the subjects in this study consisted of two English teachers and the principal of Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang. In this study, several aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum are examined, including differentiated learning, Project-Based Learning, Flexibility in Lesson Planning, and Comprehensive Formative and Summative Assessments. The data were collected based on Fullan's Theory of Change, which outlines the stages of curriculum implementation: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization.

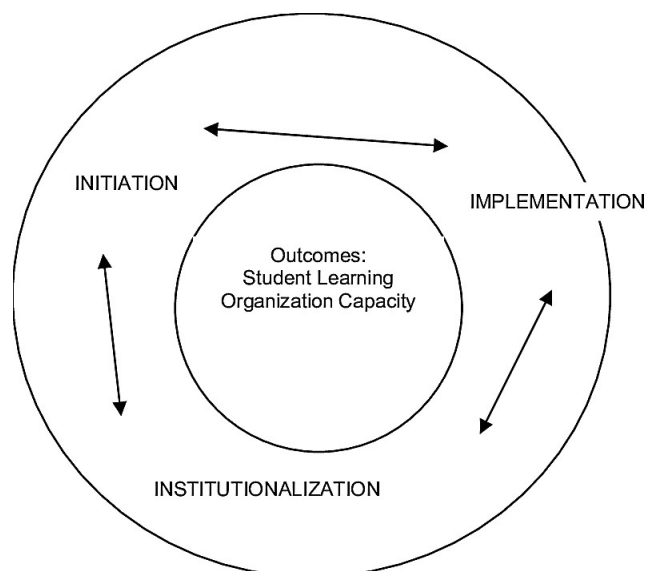


Figure 1. Fullan's Theory of Change

Findings from Class Observations

Differentiated instruction and contextual project activities have been implemented well, but not equitably. Adjusting assignments to students' abilities and interests and engaging them in project-based group work that encourages teamwork and social competencies have been attempted. Instructional media and learning methodologies are still limited. Differentiated instruction and contextual projects are the most important ways to improve learning. Both observed classrooms showed student participation and autonomy, but the levels and dynamics varied. Both classes are developing student participation and autonomy. Active participation, project topic selection, and students' confidence in expressing their thoughts showed Ms. N.H.'s class's strong student engagement and autonomy from the start. Mr. A.S.'s class began to encourage student autonomy, active engagement, and self-confidence. This approach shows a real desire to foster active learning and student decision-making.

Both teachers have successfully employed formative assessments in English learning. Feedback, oral and written evaluation, and learning reflection have been well-executed. Formative assessment has monitored learning progress and promoted student participation, even though reflection activities are general and have not yet targeted each student.

In both classrooms, student learning behavior improved, as measured by focus, independence, and initiative. Merdeka Curriculum adoption has improved students' learning behavior in both classrooms. Students focused, completed things independently, and took initiative in learning. Ms. N.H.'s class was more consistent and intense in these three areas, while Mr. A.S.'s class made incremental progress, especially in the second meeting's expanded learning initiative. A learning strategy that encourages student autonomy, collaboration, and active engagement works, according to these studies. Based on observation, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum has improved student learning outcomes in three primary areas: material understanding, creativity, and academic accomplishment. The five metrics suggest that the Merdeka Curriculum in English lessons improves learning and student results. The successful implementation of differentiated instruction, contextual projects, and formative evaluation supported student autonomy and active engagement. Students improved involvement, creativity, comprehension, and academic performance. Although instructional methodologies and individual reflection can be improved, the Merdeka Curriculum has improved a more flexible and student-centered learning environment.

Findings from Teachers and Principle Interview

After the class observations, the researcher also conducted interviews with the two English teachers and the headmaster to find out more about the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang. These interviews sought to investigate the educators' and school leaders' perspectives and experiences in executing the curriculum change. The interview data complements the classroom observation findings and provides a more comprehensive picture of how well the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented based on the change theory by Fullan.

1. Understanding and Initial Readiness

In the initiation stage, according to Fullan, the most critical element is how well education practitioners understand the essence of the change and how prepared they are to adopt the innovation. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum at MTs. As'adiyah Putra Sengkang, interviews with the two English teachers revealed that both had a good understanding of the curriculum's core philosophy and showed readiness by preparing learning tools and participating in training organized by the school. The school principal reported a well-planned, collaborative, and facilitated initiation process for the Merdeka Curriculum.

"We selected the Merdeka Curriculum due to its greater alignment with the needs of today's students. Additionally, "Those involved generally include the principal, curriculum deputy, subject teachers, and sometimes homeroom teachers. They jointly discuss and plan the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum." "We started by socializing the curriculum to teachers, then formed small teams to prepare teaching tools. Teachers were also given time to learn together and share ideas."

The data shows that teachers at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang not only understood the core values of the Merdeka Curriculum but also demonstrated pedagogical and professional readiness. According to Government Regulation No. 19 of 2005 on National Education Standards, teachers in Indonesia are required to possess four types of competencies: pedagogic, personal, social, and professional. These competencies serve as a foundational benchmark in evaluating teacher readiness in adopting educational innovation.

2. Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum

In applying differentiated learning, the first teacher explained that this approach adjusts the learning process to students' needs and learning styles. Ms. N.H. said:

"Based on my understanding, differentiated learning adapts to each student's needs. For example, at the beginning of the learning process, I identify their interests and learning preferences, then tailor the methods to suit their styles."

Meanwhile, Mr. A.S. reinforced this by emphasizing that differentiated learning means teachers must be sensitive to students' varying levels of understanding. He stated that:

"We can't generalize students' understanding because their achievement levels vary—some understand about 50%, others 75%."

Such practices demonstrate a student-centered approach that not only respects individual differences but also aligns with the broader goal of making learning more meaningful and relevant. As Junita, Edhy, and Magfirah argue, the English learning

materials should be focused on the students' needs to support their future careers. Therefore, differentiated instruction becomes a strategic pathway to ensure that learning is not only accessible but also purposeful in shaping students' academic and professional pathways.

3. Changes in Student Learning Culture (Implementation)

Regarding student independence, both teachers reported that some students had started showing self-directed learning, though they still required guidance. Ms. N.H. stated:

"They are showing learning independence because the Merdeka Curriculum trains students to study both individually and in groups."

Mr. A.S. observed:

"Some students are becoming independent, although they still need teacher guidance."

4. Continuity of Implementation

As part of the sustainability analysis of Merdeka Curriculum implementation, interviews with the two English teachers showed strong commitment to consistent application, despite acknowledging that further development is needed. Ms. N.H. said:

"Yes, implementation is consistent because it aligns with the Minister of Education's recommendation."

Mr. A.S. added:

"I strive to remain consistent, even though many adjustments are still needed."

In terms of evaluation, both teachers had begun integrating ongoing formative assessment throughout the learning process. Ms. N.H. explained:

"Evaluation is done from the beginning to the end of the learning process through various forms of assessment to monitor student ability."

From the interview results, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang has been carried out in a purposeful and collaborative manner. The teachers demonstrated a solid understanding of the curriculum concepts, including differentiated instruction and formative and summative assessment, as well as contextual projects. The school's support in the form of training, supervision, and evaluation forums has further strengthened the process. Students have begun to show improvement in independence,

motivation, and learning engagement, although they still require intensive guidance. While the implementation is not yet fully optimal, particularly in terms of consistency and individual reflection, it is moving in a positive direction, supported by the teachers' commitment and ongoing institutional support.

The Impact of the Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum towards Students' Learning Outcomes

This research adopted the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the theoretical framework. The researcher interviewed two English teachers who taught eighth-grade students, the principal of the madrasah, and several eighth-grade students as research participants. Based on classroom observations and interviews conducted at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang, the researcher presents the following findings:

1. Autonomy (Learning Independence)

The Merdeka Curriculum provides students with opportunities to choose their learning methods, express ideas, and explore learning activities aligned with their interests. Observation results indicate that teachers began adjusting materials and assignments based on students' preferences and learning styles. As stated by Ms. N.H.:

"For example, at the beginning of the lesson, I ask students about the topics they want to learn."

Students were given options in completing projects such as posters or travel itineraries, indicating space for independent expression. Interview results with Mr. A.S. further confirm this:

"Autonomy is given without coercion, so students have the freedom to innovate."

In classroom practice, students are given the freedom to choose the form of their assignments, such as creating posters, giving presentations, singing, or designing an itinerary. This flexibility allows for broader self-expression tailored to each student's individual preferences. Thus, the autonomy offered by the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum has effectively fostered students' intrinsic motivation and enhanced their engagement in the English learning process.

2. Competence (Confidence and Ability)

The enhancement of students' competence is reflected in their active participation in various learning activities, such as formative assessments, collaborative projects, and the completion of assignments designed according to individual ability levels. Teachers systematically structure tasks with graduated levels of complexity, enabling all students to feel capable and confident in completing them. approach is consistent with one teacher's statement:

"The evaluation is conducted from the beginning to the end of the lesson so we can understand the students' abilities."

Classroom observations revealed that students are beginning to demonstrate initiative in their learning, such as actively asking questions, independently searching for vocabulary, and presenting their work with confidence, although some still rely on notes. These findings indicate a shift from a one-way instructional approach to a more participatory and psychologically empowering learning process. Students' interview responses further support these observations. For example, A. Al. stated:

"I feel happy and proud because the assignments match my abilities. I also experienced a sense of pride when the teacher praised my work."

The aspect of competence among students in English learning showed improvement, marked by increased self-confidence and developing skills. Students felt capable of completing tasks according to their abilities, were brave enough to ask questions, independently sought information, and actively participated in presentations. Although some students had not fully received learning choices, in general, the learning process encouraged them to become more independent, confident, and actively engaged in it.

3. Relatedness (Social Connection)

The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum has also contributed significantly to strengthening students' social connectedness with both teachers and peers. Collaborative learning, particularly through group projects, has created opportunities for positive, enjoyable, and constructive interactions within the classroom. Furthermore, teachers have demonstrated cultural sensitivity by incorporating local contextual elements into the learning materials. This approach allows students to feel more respected and engaged with lesson content that is relevant to their lived experiences. Findings from student interviews affirm the importance of this relational dimension. For instance, F. Al stated:

"I enjoy working in groups because tasks can be completed more quickly and we can help one another."

Students also reported emotional support from both teachers and classmates, which has contributed to the development of their self-confidence in the learning process. As noted by A.A.M.

"Our teacher often gives us encouragement when we perform, and our classmates are always willing to help when we do not understand the lesson."

The results of interviews and observations, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra

Sengkang has shown a positive impact on fulfilling students' three basic psychological needs according to Self-Determination Theory (SDT): autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Students have started showcasing independent learning, enhancing their self-confidence and abilities, and cultivating positive relationships with their teachers. Although the implementation is not yet fully uniform, the direction of change indicates the growth of a more participatory, inclusive, and student-centered learning culture.

Discussion

The discussion is framed by Fullan's Educational Change Theory, which explains curriculum implementation (initiation, implementation, and institutionalization), and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which examines how autonomy, competence, and relatedness affect student motivation. The field observations are systematically interpreted and connected using these two ideas. This debate shows how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum has been implemented according to educational change ideas and how it has affected student learning at the Islamic Middle School.

Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum Based on Fullan's Theory

Fullan says change begins with understanding, awareness, and a communal commitment to it ([Zak Yehuda & Baron-Epel, 2024](#)). The interviews showed that teachers grasp the Merdeka Curriculum's underlying principle. Their statements demonstrate their awareness of varied learning and student autonomy. The madrasah head noted that the Merdeka Curriculum was specifically chosen based on student needs and designed through a cross-functional collaborative process.

The madrasah head's active involvement in training, seminars, and curriculum team formation aligns with Fullan's early capacity-building philosophy. Fullan stresses that the quality of preparation and the capacity of educational actors during the initiation stage determine the success of transformation ([Adolfsson, 2024](#); [Zak Yehuda & Baron-Epel, 2024](#)). These outcomes imply better readiness than earlier studies. For instance, Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang teachers struggled to understand the Merdeka Curriculum and had limited training and institutional assistance. This shows that teacher readiness and institutional support are crucial to initiation success.

Fullan's idea emphasizes teachers internalizing new techniques and being open to strategic changes during implementation ([Ghavifekr et al., 2017](#); [Khokhotva & Elexpuru Albizuri, 2020](#)). The first instructor (Ms. N.H.) has incorporated differentiated learning and contextual projects, according to classroom observations. She tailored projects to students' interests and talents and encouraged collaboration. Mr. A.S., the second teacher, gradually adopted these tactics, reflecting the early stages of adaptation, which Fullan recognizes as part of transformation. Formative assessment worked too. Both teachers used real-time feedback, oral and written assessments, and learning reflections. Fullan acknowledges that execution can be difficult; student reflections were broad and unpersonalized ([Fullan, 2016](#)). This means the change is still in technical adjustment and not institutionalized. Student participation and autonomy in class, including their ability to choose projects and confidence in presenting ideas, indicate

fundamental pedagogical change. Fullan says that when students take charge of their learning, structural change becomes substantive (deep change) rather than administrative (Fullan, 2020). Fullan's third phase is institutionalization, when change becomes part of the organization's culture and procedures. Interviews showed that teachers had integrated the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum into their teaching while committing to learning and creativity. Teachers said they work hard to follow the new curriculum despite hurdles.

Institutionally, the Islamic boarding schools has frequent oversight and evaluation, including teacher reflective and collaborative forums. This confirms Fullan's claim that supportive leadership and a robust learning culture drive institutionalization (Pendergast & May, 2024). Our dedication to developing a shared learning ecosystem shows that transformation is becoming part of our culture. The principal also noticed pupils' learning behavior improving in activeness, confidence, and collaboration. This shows that the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is altering the curriculum and creating a new madrasah learning culture. As Fullan stresses, true change must alter teacher-student interactions (Fullan, 2016).

Based on five observation indicators—practices, student engagement, formative assessment, behavioral change, and learning outcomes—and in-depth interview results, Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang's Merdeka Belajar Curriculum implementation is solid and moving toward institutionalization. Teachers are incorporating the new curriculum's ideals into their lessons, with mixed results. This supports Fullan's claim that transformative leadership, teacher cooperation, and school ecosystem participation generate incremental educational reform. Fullan says, “Educational change depends on what teachers do and think—it's as simple and as complex as that” (Hargreaves et al., 2014).

This complexity is reflected in Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang's Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Principal initiative, teachers' openness to modifying instructional approaches, and students' positive responses show genuine improvement. These activities support the school's vision: “Noble in Character, Excellent in Educational Quality and Da'wah, and Competitive in Achievement.” The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum's Pancasila Student Profile Projects and Rahmatan lil 'Alamin Learner Projects, which reflect pesantren culture, promote noble character and Islamic principles. Students' religious attitudes, empathy, and social responsibility are shaped through learning activities.

Differentiated learning, diagnostic assessments, and contextual projects promote the teacher's role as a facilitator of meaningful learning, demonstrating educational excellence (Clark et al., 2022; Azis et al., 2024; Anning, 2025). Teachers are encouraged to reflect, collaborate, and enhance their skills, following Fullan's notion that sustained and values-based capacity building leads to significant change. Competitive accomplishment is achieved by fostering students' creativity and overall competencies—academic and non-academic. The Merdeka Curriculum allows students to thrive in their interests and talents while upholding pesantren principles. According to Fullan, this reform will succeed only if there is constant reflection, teacher and

institutional capacity building, and systemic support from the entire madrasah ecosystem (Fullan, 2020). Without sustainability and consistency, change may be cosmetic and fail to transform.

The Impact of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation on Students' Learning Outcomes

The researcher used Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to assess Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang students' learning outcomes after Merdeka Belajar Curriculum implementation. This theory highlights intrinsic motivation and asserts that individuals thrive when their three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are satisfied (Adams et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020). We triangulated student interviews, classroom observations, and instructor interviews for this investigation. Each SDT component was examined to determine how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum affects student motivation and learning. Each SDT indicator's findings are presented below.

Research indicates that the Merdeka Curriculum lets pupils manage their learning. Students feel respected and empowered when they may choose assignments (posters, presentations, itineraries) and themes that interest them. Ryan and Deci (2020) agree that learning autonomy boosts intrinsic motivation, engagement, and understanding. Mardiyah et al. also note that social media-mediated, engaging learning experiences can boost students' intrinsic motivation.

According to instructor interviews, children received independence without pressure, which stimulated innovation. Students also reported being more excited and confident when they could choose their work format. However, autonomy is still inconsistent and dependent on instructor policies. To maintain student motivation, Gagné et al. (2018) recommend consistency in autonomy-supportive learning environments. Thus, while its implementation is dynamic, the overall trend is toward a learning culture that supports student choice and independence. Autonomy boosts student engagement and creates a more personal, inclusive, and meaningful learning environment. In the second aspect of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which is competence, pupils develop both confidence and the ability to complete academic assignments (Stupnisky et al., 2018). Students are now more active in learning, asking questions, independently exploring for terminology, and confidently engaging in group presentations. Differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum has given pupils optimal challenge, or challenges that match their skills (Azis et al., 2024).

Many pupils felt gratified when their teacher praised their work, which boosted their confidence. This implies that teachers' positive reinforcement boosts students' self-confidence. According to SDT, positive learning experiences and feedback boost students' confidence and motivation (Howard et al., 2021). However, some students struggled since not all learning activities matched their ability. To ensure success and optimal competence growth for all students, differentiation tactics must be modified and utilized regularly.

Merdeka Belajar Curriculum implementation also highlighted relatedness or social connectivity (Abidin, 2025). Group work and collaborative projects helped kids and teachers bond emotionally. According to self-determination theory, students need social relatedness to feel welcomed, supported, and part of a learning community (Chiu et al., 2023). Positive feedback from teachers during student presentations helps develop a supportive learning environment. Local contexts in education helped students emotionally connect to the information and make it more relevant to their lives. Student responses showed that positive classroom connections enhanced confidence and inspired them to support each other in learning. This supportive and mutually reinforcing classroom climate represents SDT's key tenet that relatedness enhances psychological well-being, motivation, and academic accomplishment (Shen et al., 2024).

These findings support Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical framework for understanding how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum affects student learning (Chandra et al., 2025). Implementing this program in Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang has improved learning motivation, active involvement, and academic accomplishment by meeting students' three core psychological requirements. The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at Islamic Middle School was implemented after extensive data analysis. As'adiyah Putra Sengkang supports student-centered learning and improves student results. Analysis of classroom observation data and interviews with the principal, English teachers, and students shows this. Teacher use of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum components such as differentiated instruction, context-based projects, formative assessment, and local content was seen in classes VIII.1 and VIII.4. These tactics encourage active student engagement and a more inclusive learning environment, allowing students to learn according to their interests and abilities.

Teacher interviews showed that they had moved from teacher-centered to student-centered practices. As Ryan and Deci (2020) described in Self-Determination Theory, teachers became more conscious of the significance of customizing instruction to students' needs and providing activities that foster autonomy, competence, and social relatedness. They reported increased student participation, creativity, and opinion-expressing confidence. The principal emphasized the school's dedication to continual teacher training, collaborative teaching, and an innovative culture. He said school leadership supervises, guides, and provides reflecting spaces for instructors to improve their teaching.

In interviews, pupils reported direct benefits from the new learning technique. Many children reported feeling more motivated, confident, and connected to teachers and peers. They also thought that learning activities were more relevant to their daily lives and that freely choosing project themes made them more involved and responsible. Classroom observations, teacher and principal interviews, and student interviews showed a clear correlation between Merdeka Belajar Curriculum implementation and student learning outcomes. These effects include greater motivation, topic understanding, communication and teamwork skills, and academic engagement. Thus, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang

has improved students' cognitive, emotional, and social development. The alignment of instructional practices with students' psychological needs, backed by school leadership and teacher dedication, shows that this curriculum reform can impact learning results.

4. CONCLUSION

According to Michael Fullan's theory of educational transformation, Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang's Merdeka Belajar Curriculum implementation was slow yet well-directed. In the introduction stage, the principal and instructors were aware and committed to choosing and preparing the curriculum. Training, curriculum team formation, and cross-functional collaboration built capability under transformative leadership. In the implementation stage, instructors tried to use differentiated learning, formative assessment, and contextual projects, but they understood and adapted differently. Students' involvement, independence, and learning behavior improved, demonstrating that the process had changed teaching and learning methods beyond the administrative level. Consistent teaching, thoughtful monitoring, and teacher collaboration indicate that the program is institutionalizing. The adjustments improved instructional methods, school culture, and educator relationships. The Merdeka Curriculum promotes Islamic values, character, and potential, in line with the school's pesantren-based madrasah mission. Thus, Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang's Merdeka Curriculum implementation has progressed meaningfully and steadily due to strong leadership, active teacher and student involvement, and the institution's commitment to continuous improvement.

The Merdeka Curriculum at Islamic Middle School As'adiyah Putra Sengkang has improved student learning outcomes, according to Self-Determination Theory. A learning approach that stresses freedom to learn, optimal challenges, and supporting social contact proportionally fulfills autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Students can choose assignments, explore their hobbies, and be creative without pressure. This concept encourages intrinsic motivation and active learning, making learning more personal and meaningful. Teachers' tailored instruction gives pupils demanding activities that match their levels, boosting their self-confidence and competence. A close relationship between professors and students and peer collaboration in contextual projects improve social connectedness, which is essential for motivation and academic achievement. The Merdeka Curriculum improves cognitive achievement and promotes a learning environment that encourages psychological and social growth. In detail, the Merdeka Curriculum implementation improved students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and conceptual understanding through contextual tasks and authentic assessment; increased intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, and a sense of responsibility for the learning process; and improved presentation skills, coll. These findings support the Merdeka Curriculum's ability to grow kids academically, emotionally, and practically by putting psychological needs at the center of meaningful, independent, and sustainable learning.

Advice for Teachers Improve diversified and project-based learning skills based on students' characteristics and Islamic boarding school educational values. To create more meaningful learning experiences, build learning strategies on student needs rather than

curriculum content. Future researchers should also examine the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum's effects on students' character development, 21st-century skills, and project-based learning across educational levels. Mixed techniques can enhance findings and provide a more complete understanding.

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