



Student Perceptions of Project-Based Learning in Islamic Schools under the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze students' perceptions of the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) within the Merdeka Curriculum at an Islamic junior high school in Indonesia. The study employed a quantitative method with a survey approach. A total of 65 students participated as respondents. Data were collected through a questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics to examine students' perceptions of the implementation of Project-Based Learning. The findings revealed that 47% of the students perceived Project-Based Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum as moderately effective. In addition, students reported that Project-Based Learning enhanced their active participation in the learning process and supported the development of the Pancasila Student Profile. These findings indicate that Project-Based Learning is positively perceived by students and has the potential to support the achievement of the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic schools. The study highlights the importance of strengthening the planning, implementation, and evaluation of project-based learning activities to improve students' learning experiences and competency development.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as a nation-state, continues to shape its historical trajectory. Like a living organism, the Indonesian state was born, has grown, developed, and sustained its existence in pursuit of the ideals established at its founding. These noble ideals are explicitly stated in the fourth paragraph of the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, namely: “*To protect all the people of Indonesia and the entire homeland of Indonesia; to promote the general welfare; to educate the life of the nation; and to participate in the establishment of a world order based on freedom, lasting peace, and social justice*” (Abdillah et al., 2021).

As a nation-state, Indonesia should take pride in its predecessors who laid a strong and noble foundation regarding the direction and purpose of national life. Therefore, every element of society is expected to contribute according to its respective role in realizing the nation's ideals. One strategy to accelerate the achievement of these aspirations is to prepare future generations who are resilient, intelligent, independent, and firmly grounded in spiritual values. Such generations must be nurtured within a conducive environment, one of which is the

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educational institution.

Education envisions the development of individuals who are devoted to Allah SWT and possess noble character. It aims to produce individuals who are honest, just, ethical, respectful, disciplined, harmonious, and productive, both personally and socially. To achieve these goals, the government, through the Ministry of Education and Culture, continues to undertake reforms and innovations in the field of education. One of these efforts is the development and improvement of the national curriculum (Engkizar et al., 2026).

Curriculum development is not merely an abstraction; rather, it involves preparing various examples and alternative actions that are inspired by different ideas and necessary adjustments considered important (Nasbi, 2017). According to Ulum (2020), as interpreted by Oemar Hamalik, curriculum development refers to the planning of learning opportunities intended to bring students toward desired changes and to assess the extent to which such changes have occurred in learners.

Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) has become one of the flagship initiatives of the Minister of Education and Culture. Minister Nadiem Makarim sought to create a more enjoyable learning atmosphere. "This is very important and a major concern because Mr. Nadiem and the Ministry of Education and Culture want to create a happy learning environment in schools. That is why the slogan is Merdeka Belajar," stated Ade Erlangga, Head of the Bureau of Communication and Public Services of the Ministry of Education and Culture, during a public discussion on Merdeka Belajar and the National Examination at Hotel Ibis Jakarta Thamrin on December 14, 2019.

Ade further explained that the objective of Merdeka Belajar is to create a positive educational experience for teachers, students, and parents. According to him, the program emerged in response to various concerns regarding the education system, including the tendency to evaluate students primarily through predetermined academic scores.

Najelaa Shihab and the Komunitas Pendidik Belajar, in their book *Merdeka Belajar di Ruang Kelas* (first edition, October 2017), identified seven key components of the Merdeka Belajar concept: (i) emphasizing intrinsic learning motivation while minimizing rewards and punishments such as rankings and similar forms of evaluation; (ii) involving students in planning their learning goals according to their readiness and challenges; (iii) explaining the relevance and benefits of learning materials in accordance with students' interests and characteristics; (iv) fostering personal discipline and responsibility through the consequences of students' own decisions; (v) encouraging students to recognize that learning involves increasing challenges and that mistakes constitute an integral part of the learning process; (vi) providing opportunities for students to make choices related to leadership, time management, and group selection based on their talents and interests; and (vii) involving students in self-assessment and encouraging them to communicate the results (Maruti et al., 2023).

Based on the foregoing discussion, Merdeka Belajar can be understood as a principle that provides students with greater autonomy to explore and develop their potential. Consequently, the learning process enables students to actualize their knowledge, attitudes, and skills without excessive pressure from either teachers or parents. Through this process, students are expected to develop creativity and learning motivation in accordance with their talents, interests, and individual potential.

Accordingly, this article aims to provide an alternative perspective for educators while examining students' perceptions of the implementation of Merdeka Belajar through Project-Based Learning (PjBL). The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes collaborative, innovative, and experiential learning models.

One of the primary instructional approaches promoted within the Merdeka Curriculum is Project-Based Learning (PjBL).

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research method with a survey approach to analyze students' perceptions of the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) within the Merdeka Curriculum. The study was conducted at an Islamic junior high school in Indonesia, involving 65 seventh-grade students as respondents. Data were collected using a questionnaire distributed directly to the respondents. The research instrument consisted of 20 items designed to measure students' perceptions of the implementation of Project-Based Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum (Apuke, 2017; Creswell, 2023; Purssell & McCrae, 2020). Each item was developed based on indicators related to student engagement, learning effectiveness, and the achievement of learning objectives. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to describe students' perceptions of the implementation of Project-Based Learning. The results of the analysis were presented in the form of percentages and categorical classifications to illustrate the level of effectiveness of Project-Based Learning based on students' perceptions (Engkizar et al., 2023; Lim, 2025; Purssell & McCrae, 2020; Takona, 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 65 seventh-grade boarding students who participated in learning under the Merdeka Curriculum at an Islamic junior high school in Indonesia. The findings are presented based on percentage data obtained from the research questionnaire.

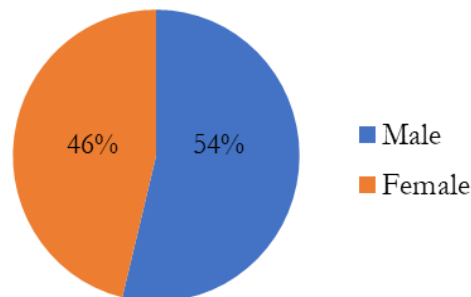


Fig 1. Respondents' Characteristics Based on Gender

The analysis shows that the respondents consisted of 54% male students and 46% female students. This indicates that the gender distribution of respondents was relatively balanced between male and female students.

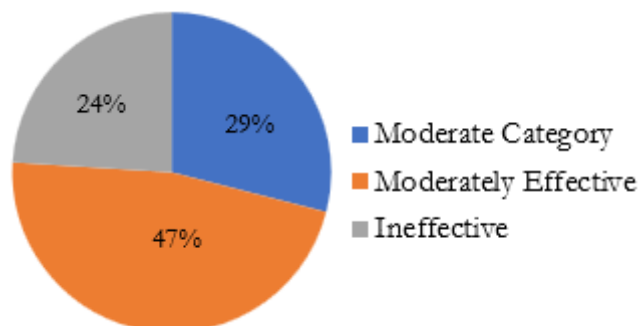


Fig 2. Students' Perceptions of the Project-Based Learning Model

Students' perceptions of the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) with the theme "OSIS Chairperson Election Democratic Process" showed that 49% of students agreed, 27% disagreed, and 24% strongly agreed. These findings indicate that most students had a positive perception of the implementation of the project-based learning model in the learning process.

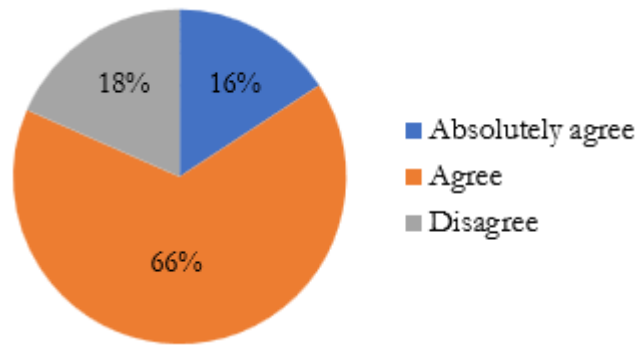


Fig 3. Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Project-Based Learning

The results show that 47% of students stated that Project-Based Learning within the Merdeka Curriculum was categorized as moderately effective. In addition, 29% of students considered it neutral, while 24% stated that it was ineffective. Overall, the findings indicate that Project-Based Learning is perceived as moderately effective by most students in supporting the learning process.

Students

Students are the main component in the Islamic education system, functioning both as the subject and object of the learning process. In educational perspectives, students are individuals who are in a stage of physical and psychological development and therefore require guidance from teachers. According to Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, students are members of society who seek to develop their potential through education at certain educational pathways, levels, and types (Amin et al., 2024). In the learning process, students play a central role as they directly experience the transformation of knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Therefore, teachers need to understand students' characteristics, including their needs, developmental dimensions, intelligence, and personality (Supriani et al., 2022).

Project-Based Learning (PjBL)

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is a student-centered learning model that involves investigating complex, real, and relevant problems. Al-Qoyyim & Kurniawan (2025) explains that PjBL encourages students to conduct in-depth exploration of a topic through a constructive learning process. Meanwhile, Lestari (2012) states that PjBL provides opportunities for students to engage in project activities that require problem-solving skills, decision-making, and investigative work, both independently and collaboratively.

The steps of Project-Based Learning include: (1) determining essential questions, (2) designing a project plan, (3) creating a project schedule, (4) monitoring project progress, (5) assessing project outcomes, and (6) evaluating learning experiences. These stages emphasize active student involvement in the learning process and the development of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity.

Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum is an educational policy designed to provide autonomy for educational institutions in developing learning processes in accordance with students' characteristics, cultural context, and school environment. This policy aims to optimize the potential of both teachers and students in creating more innovative, independent, and student-centered learning. In its implementation, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes meaningful and enjoyable learning, focusing not only on cognitive achievement but also on the development of critical thinking skills, creativity, and students' character (Engkizar et al., 2026; Hasan et al., 2025; Tadol et al., 2025). This is in line with national education goals as regulated by law, which aim

to develop learners into individuals who are faithful, pious, knowledgeable, creative, and responsible.

The Merdeka Curriculum also encourages teachers to select and develop appropriate methods, media, and learning materials based on students' developmental levels, interests, and needs (Julianto et al., 2025; Miranti, 2024; Rahmat, 2024). In this context, teachers act as facilitators who not only transfer knowledge but also actively guide the learning process. Furthermore, Merdeka Learning is understood as an approach that provides space for both teachers and students to innovate in the learning process. However, this freedom is not unlimited, as it remains within the framework of national education objectives. In practice, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum still faces various challenges, particularly in policy adaptation, teacher readiness, and changes in learning culture. Therefore, continuous strengthening of teacher competencies is required to ensure the optimal achievement of curriculum objectives.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that the project-based learning model in the Merdeka Curriculum has received a positive response from students, with the majority of respondents expressing agreement with its implementation. Furthermore, the effectiveness of this learning model falls into the “moderately effective” category based on the average scores obtained. These findings suggest that project-based learning has the potential to support a more active learning process, although its level of effectiveness remains moderate and requires optimization in its implementation. In addition, the implementation of project-based learning encourages students' engagement in collaborative activities and problem-solving processes. This approach also contributes to the development of students' critical thinking and creativity, which are essential competencies in 21st-century learning. However, the moderate level of effectiveness suggests that improvements in instructional design, teacher facilitation, and learning resources are still needed to maximize its impact on student learning outcomes.

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