

APPLICATION OF MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN IPAS LEARNING

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the impact of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum on student engagement and academic performance in Natural and Social Sciences (IPAS) learning at Wangiwisata Public Elementary School, located in Bandung Regency, West Java, Indonesia. The research adopts a quantitative approach with a pretest-posttest design. Data were obtained through student engagement questionnaires, academic performance tests, and teacher interviews. The population consisted of fourth- and fifth-grade students in elementary schools that had implemented the Merdeka Curriculum for at least one academic year. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, focusing specifically on students and teachers from Wangiwisata Public Elementary School. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure changes in engagement and academic performance, and Pearson correlation to examine the relationship between these two variables. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data from teacher interviews. The results indicate a notable increase in student engagement across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, with an average increase of over 20%. Academic performance also improved, particularly in critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Teachers reported greater flexibility in designing learning activities, and the active learning approach promoted by the curriculum enabled students to relate learning materials to real-life contexts. These findings suggest that the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to enhance both student engagement and academic outcomes when implemented effectively, especially in the context of public elementary education in Indonesia.

Keywords

Merdeka Curriculum, Student involvement, IPAS Learning.



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INTRODUCTION

Education is a vital element in the development of a nation. Through education, the younger generation can develop deep intellectual, emotional, and social potential. Education in Indonesia has undergone many changes, both in terms of the system and the curriculum applied. One of the major changes that has recently been implemented is the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum is designed to provide greater flexibility in the learning process, so that it can be adjusted to the needs and characteristics of students (Abdul Ghani et al., 2023); (Munif, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum aims to provide space for students to learn according to their interests, talents, and abilities (Pratycia et al., 2023); (Simon, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum brings significant changes in the way of learning, by providing more space for students to interact, explore knowledge, and develop creativity and critical skills (Aristanto et al., 2024); (Muliawan, 2024); (Rosanawati et al., 2025). In its implementation, learning does not only focus on mastering the material, but also on forming character and skills that are relevant to real life (Arifin, 2024). As expressed by Prananda, (2023), Maulia & Purnomo, (2023) effective learning is learning that is able to encourage active student involvement, which will ultimately improve their understanding and performance. Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is expected to have a positive impact on the quality of education, especially in terms of student involvement and performance.

One of the subjects that is the focus of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is Natural and Social Sciences (IPAS). This subject not only provides knowledge about natural and social phenomena, but also plays a role in developing critical thinking skills, solving problems, and improving students' understanding of the world around them (Pujiastuti, 2023); (Laksono et al., 2023). With a more flexible approach in the Merdeka Curriculum, IPAS Learning can be designed to be more interesting, relevant, and contextual, thus encouraging higher student engagement (Fakhri, 2023); (Nailu, 2025); (Riniwanti et al., 2024). However, changes in the implementation of this curriculum certainly present challenges, especially in measuring the extent to which student engagement and performance can be affected. Student engagement in learning greatly determines the success of education itself (Fikrie, 2021); (Buchari, 2018). This involvement is not only seen in the form of active participation in class, but also in the way students interact with the subject matter, discuss ideas, and apply the knowledge they have acquired in everyday life. According to Anshari (2009) and Hasanov (2021) student engagement encompasses three important dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral, all of which have a major impact on students' academic performance.

Student engagement in the teaching and learning of Natural and Social Sciences (IPAS) at SDN Wangiwisata still faces various challenges that require serious attention. Based on observations in grades IV and V, it was found that a significant number of students tended to be passive during the learning process. Approximately 40% of students were less active in class discussions and showed limited enthusiasm for practical or project-based activities provided by the teachers. Interviews with several IPAS teachers revealed that the learning approach used so far remains teacher-centered, resulting in suboptimal student engagement cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally. This is supported by documentation of student academic performance, which shows low levels of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, particularly in topics requiring real-life application of IPAS concepts. This phenomenon raises academic concern, as it indicates that the current teaching strategies have not fully succeeded in fostering comprehensive and meaningful student engagement.

In response to these challenges, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN Wangiwisata is a strategic initiative undertaken by the school. According to meeting documentation and interviews with the principal, the decision to adopt the Merdeka Curriculum was driven by the need to accommodate diverse student learning styles and to create a more flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning environment. The curriculum is perceived to provide more space for teachers to be creative and innovative in designing learning activities that are relevant to students' needs. However, in its implementation, the involvement of school stakeholders such as teachers, the principal, the school committee, and parents plays a crucial role. Interviews revealed strong support from the principal, including internal training sessions and sufficient time allocation for instructional planning. Furthermore, the school committee has begun to actively participate in developing project-based programs. Despite this, challenges persist, particularly in teacher readiness to apply more active and differentiated learning approaches. This issue becomes a central focus of the research, as the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum heavily relies on the active involvement of all stakeholders within the school's educational ecosystem.

This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in IPAS Learning and how it affects student engagement and performance. The main focus of this study is to identify changes that occur in the level of student engagement and how these changes relate to improvements in their academic performance. In this context, this study will look at how the process of change is influenced by the implementation of a more flexible curriculum based on students'

interests and talents. One important aspect that will be analyzed in this study is the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum policy on student interaction patterns with learning materials. In addition, this study will also explore how educators facilitate these changes in daily learning practices. As conveyed by Atin et al. (2023), the role of teachers in supporting the curriculum change process is very important because teachers are not only teachers, but also facilitators who are able to create a learning environment that supports student engagement.

The main advantage of this study is a more in-depth analysis of student engagement in the context of IPAS learning under the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Most previous studies have discussed more about the implementation of the curriculum in general, such as research on Jannah et al., (2022) which research examines the implementation of the 2022 Merdeka Curriculum in two schools with a qualitative approach and descriptive analysis. The results of the study indicate several challenges in implementing the curriculum, including the demand for teachers to be more creative in designing teaching modules, learning objectives, and learning flows. Research Rifa'i et al., (2022) This study focuses on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. This study discusses how the Merdeka Curriculum gives schools and teachers the freedom to explore their abilities and deliver essential materials according to the available resources. Furthermore, the study Muna & Fathurrahman, (2023) which examines the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in mathematics learning at SD Nasima, Semarang City. This study aims to analyze how the curriculum is implemented, as well as its challenges and successes.

Compared to previous studies, this study has a more specific focus on the field of study of Natural and Social Sciences (IPAS), which is known to have unique characteristics and its own complexity in the process of its implementation at the educational level. IPAS as a subject combines various concepts from natural and social sciences, thus requiring a different approach in teaching and learning. This study aims to explore more deeply the relationship between the level of student engagement in learning and the academic performance they achieve, an aspect that has not been widely explored in previous studies. This is a new aspect (novelty) in this study, which is expected to provide new contributions to the understanding of the factors that influence student academic achievement in the context of IPAS learning.

METHOD

The paper employs a quantitative approach with a descriptive and correlational research design. According to Sugiyono, (2019), quantitative research with descriptive and correlational design is a research method that uses numerical data and statistical analysis. The quantitative approach was chosen because this study aims to measure and analyze student engagement and performance in IPAS learning after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Descriptive design is used to describe the phenomena that occur in IPAS learning, while correlational design is used to analyze the relationship between changes in student engagement and improvements in their performance after the implementation of the curriculum.

This study was conducted in several elementary schools that have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, which were selected purposively by considering schools that have implemented it for at least one academic year. The subjects of the study were students in grades IV and V who were involved in IPAS learning at SDN Wangiwisata. The selection of grades IV and V was based on the fact that students in these classes were quite mature in terms of cognitive abilities and learning skills, so it is expected to provide a clearer picture of changes in their involvement and performance.

The data was collected through several methods, namely student engagement questionnaires, academic performance tests, and interviews with teachers. The student engagement questionnaire is specifically designed to measure the level of student engagement in IPAS learning, which includes three main dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement. Each dimension is measured using a Likert scale containing statements about student activities in class, interest in the material, and their emotional involvement during learning. Academic performance tests are used to measure student learning outcomes in science subjects, based on the applied curriculum, with questions covering the learning material that has been taught, and aiming to assess students' understanding and application of knowledge. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers involved in IPAS learning using the Merdeka Curriculum to explore their views on changes that occur in learning, how they facilitate student engagement, and assess student performance.

The data used in this research consists of primary data, obtained through the following instruments: 1) Student engagement questionnaires, designed to assess students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement in IPAS learning; 2) Academic performance tests, used to evaluate students' learning outcomes based on curriculum-relevant science content; 3) Semi-

structured interviews with teachers, to gain insights into instructional changes, strategies for engaging students, and their assessments of student performance. Sources of data include: 1) Fourth- and fifth-grade students participating in IPAS learning; 2) IPAS subject teachers who have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in their teaching practice. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling, with the rationale that selected participants must have experienced at least one full year of learning under the Merdeka Curriculum.

Data were analyzed through the following methods; 1) Descriptive statistical analysis was used to process data from questionnaires and academic tests, including mean scores, percentages, and visualizations (graphs and diagrams) to describe student engagement levels and academic performance before and after curriculum implementation; 2) To determine the relationship between student engagement and academic performance, a Pearson correlation test was employed; 3) Qualitative data from teacher interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, aiming to identify recurring themes regarding teachers' perceptions, teaching practices, and student involvement under the Merdeka Curriculum.

Based on the research objectives and questions, the hypotheses of this study are stated as follows:

1. H_0 (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant relationship between student engagement in IPAS learning and their academic performance after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.
2. H_1 (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a significant relationship between student engagement in IPAS learning and their academic performance after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Hypothesis testing was conducted at a 5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$). The decision to accept or reject the null hypothesis was based on the p-value obtained from the Pearson correlation analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

In this study, data collected from student engagement questionnaires, academic performance tests, and teacher interviews conducted at SDN Wangiwisata, Bandung Regency, were analyzed to provide a clear picture of the impact of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum on student engagement and performance in IPAS learning.

Student Engagement in IPAS Learning

The results of the student engagement questionnaire at SDN Wangiwisata showed that most students experienced an increase in their engagement after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Based on the analysis of the questionnaire data, it was found that 85% of students demonstrated a high level of engagement, with the average scores for cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement dimensions being higher than those from the previous period. Furthermore, 60% of students were more active in participating in class discussions and practical activities, and showed a greater interest in the topics studied in IPAS learning.

This is in accordance with the theory of Srimuliyani, (2023), which states that high student involvement has an impact on a better understanding of the subject matter.

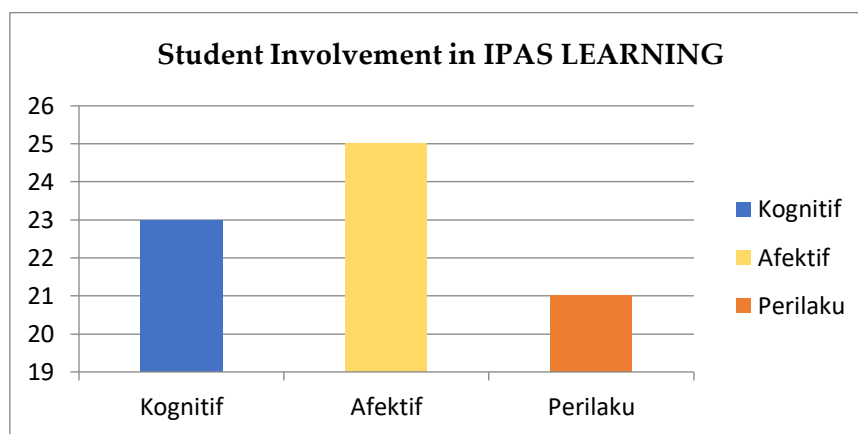


Figure 1. Student Involvement in IPAS LEARNING

The diagram above shows changes in the level of student engagement based on the three main dimensions of cognitive, affective, and behavioral. After the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, student engagement in all dimensions increased significantly. Cognitive engagement increased by 23%, affective by 25%, and behavioral by 21%. This indicates that students are more involved in learning and have more motivation to follow the teaching and learning process.

Student Academic Performance

The results of the academic performance test given to students showed a significant increase after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The average student social science test score increased by 15% compared to the previous test results, indicating an increase in understanding of social science concepts. Student performance in questions that test critical thinking and problem-solving skills also increased. As many as 70% of students showed better ability in answering questions that require analysis and application of concepts, which were previously poorly mastered.

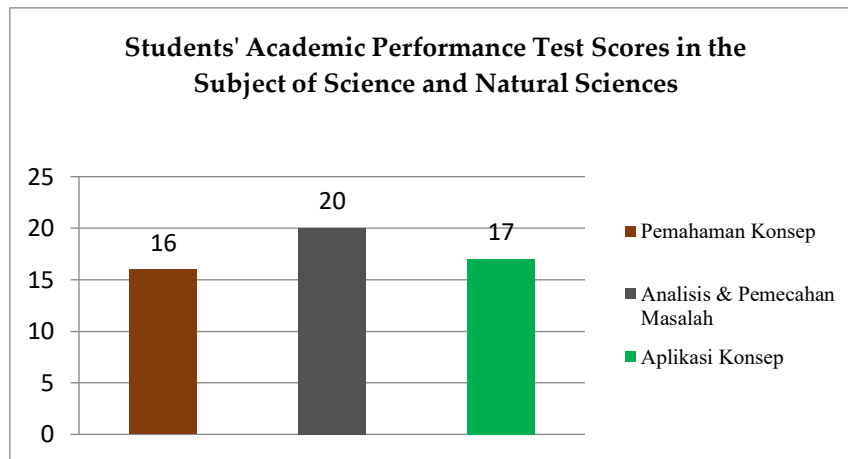


Figure 2. Changes in Students' Academic Performance in the Science Test

Comparison of students' academic performance test scores in various question categories before and after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. It can be seen that there is a significant increase in scores in all question categories, especially in questions that test analytical and problem-solving skills, which increased by 20%.

Teachers' Views on the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

Based on interviews with teachers, most teachers (90%) said that they felt more flexible in designing learning after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This policy gives them the freedom to choose learning methods and materials that are more in line with students' needs and interests. As stated by one teacher, "With this freedom, we can be more creative in designing learning that not only accommodates academic needs, but also students' interests." This allows teachers to create a more enjoyable and relevant learning experience for each student. Teachers also stated that with this freedom, they can design a more interactive and interesting learning atmosphere. Learning is no longer just focused on rigid teaching, but more on experiences that can arouse students' curiosity and enthusiasm. They feel flexible to explore various approaches that can enrich the learning process.

In addition, the active learning-based approach adopted in the Merdeka Curriculum has a positive impact on student engagement. As many as 85% of teachers interviewed noted that students were more involved in every learning activity, from discussions to collaborative projects. One teacher added, "Students not only listen to the material, but they are also active in discussions and working on projects that involve problem solving." In this way, students not only receive information but also actively participate in building their own knowledge. In line with this, the results of the study by Rofiudin et al. (2024) show that active learning that involves students in

various activities such as discussions and collaborative projects can significantly improve students' understanding and skills. Teachers also feel that the active learning approach applied in the Merdeka Curriculum allows students to more easily relate what they learn to real life. One teacher said, "Students are better able to relate the theories they learn to everyday life situations, so that learning becomes more meaningful to them." The knowledge gained no longer seems abstract, but can be applied directly in everyday situations. This makes learning more meaningful and can provide long-term benefits for student development. This is in accordance with the view of Saap (2023), which states that learning connected to real-life contexts can significantly increase student engagement.

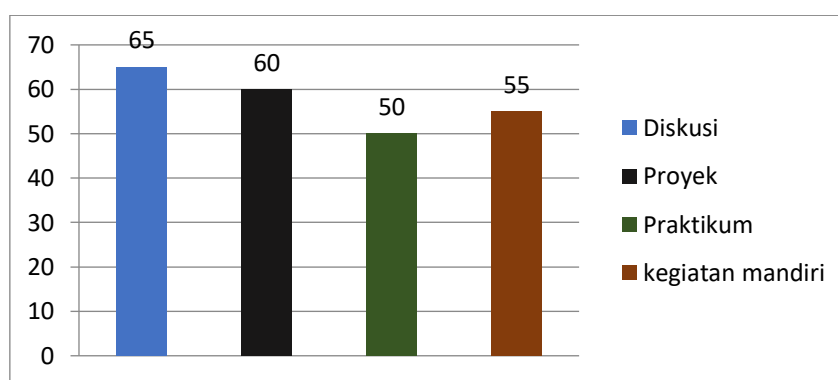


Figure 3. Learning After Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Significant increase in student engagement in various aspects of learning after the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which shows that students are more active in participating in discussions, projects, practicums, and independent activities. Overall, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has had a very positive impact on student engagement in learning. With a more flexible and active learning-based approach, teachers can create a more interactive and relevant learning atmosphere. This allows students to more easily relate the material being studied to real life, which improves the quality of their understanding and engagement. If the existing challenges can be overcome, the Merdeka Curriculum has great potential in creating more meaningful and in-depth learning.

Discussion

The research conducted at SDN Wangiwisata, Bandung Regency, revealed that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum had a positive impact on student engagement and academic achievement in IPAS learning. Based on student engagement questionnaire data, 85% of students demonstrated high levels of cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement. Students were more active in discussions, experiments, and group projects. In addition, academic

performance test results showed an average score increase of 15% compared to previous outcomes, particularly in areas of critical thinking and problem-solving. This was further supported by interviews with teachers who noted that students were more enthusiastic, confident, and able to connect IPAS materials with real-life situations. These findings strongly suggest that the new approach introduced through the Merdeka Curriculum has significantly improved the quality of learning at SDN Wangiwisata.

This increase can be explained through the theoretical foundation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered and activity-based learning. The curriculum provides students with the space to become active participants in the learning process through discussions, experiments, and contextual projects. This aligns with Nathaniela, (2023), who argued that students' active involvement significantly influences comprehension and learning outcomes. In this model, students are not merely recipients of knowledge but are also active constructors of understanding, which enhances their sense of ownership and motivation in learning.

The findings at SDN Wangiwisata are consistent with previous research by Putri Ningrat et al., (2018), which emphasized the interconnected role of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor engagement in influencing learning outcomes. Cognitive engagement includes critical and analytical thinking, affective engagement relates to students' interest and emotional responses, and behavioral engagement involves active classroom participation. Nurjadid, (2025) and Insyasiska, D., Siti, Z., & Herawati, (2015) also confirmed that a high level of student involvement across these dimensions contributes to a more comprehensive and effective learning experience. When students are challenged intellectually and emotionally connected to the material, they develop intrinsic motivation, which ultimately enhances their academic performance. At SDN Wangiwisata, such engagement is reflected in increased student enthusiasm and academic growth.

The theoretical underpinnings of this transformation align with constructivist learning theory, which asserts that students learn more effectively when they construct their own understanding through meaningful and relevant experiences. This is precisely the kind of learning environment supported by the Merdeka Curriculum. The flexibility granted to teachers enables them to design contextualized and student-centered learning experiences. (Maskur, 2023); (Sulistiyosari et al., 2022), and Taneo et al. (2023) emphasize that when students engage in interest-driven, project-based learning, they gain a deeper grasp of the subject matter. Teachers at SDN Wangiwisata confirmed this by stating that they can now incorporate thematic and problem-based

learning, making IPAS content feel more relevant and applicable to students' lives.

Despite these positive outcomes, several challenges emerged during the implementation process. One major issue identified through teacher interviews is the lack of sufficient time to prepare individualized and contextual learning materials. A teacher explained, "We feel limited by time to design adequate learning experiences that respond to the diverse interests of our students." This echoes findings by Rosa et al., (2024), and Sirozi, (2024) who pointed out that flexible curricula often lack adequate planning time and technical support. Furthermore, while teachers at SDN Wangiwisata appreciate the curriculum's flexibility, not all feel fully prepared to implement project-based or independent learning models. According to Suryadi, (2024), and Prananda & Hadiyanto, (2019) ongoing professional development is essential to equip teachers with the necessary skills to implement curriculum innovations effectively.

Another pressing issue is student readiness for independent learning, a core principle of the Merdeka Curriculum. Some students at SDN Wangiwisata reported difficulty in managing their schedules and responsibilities due to a lack of structure. One student remarked, "I feel confused without a clear schedule, and it's hard to manage my time for assignments." This aligns with Nur, (2021), who found that students unfamiliar with self-directed learning often show reduced engagement. Therefore, additional scaffolding, such as structured learning tools and guidance, is crucial to help students transition. Furthermore, differences in student learning styles pose a challenge. Teachers noted that while many students adapted well to independent learning, others required more structured support. As one teacher mentioned, "We must ensure that all students, regardless of their learning style, have equal opportunities to grow." Research by Sahudra, (2023) supports this, emphasizing the importance of tailored instruction. Overall, these challenges highlight the need for well-planned implementation, continuous teacher training, and support systems to ensure that the Merdeka Curriculum delivers on its promise of meaningful, relevant, and student-centered learning.

CONCLUSION

It can be deemed that IPAS learning at SDN Wangiwisata, located in Bandung Regency, has shown a positive impact on student engagement and academic performance. After the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, student engagement increased significantly across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, as reflected in students' more active participation

and greater interest in the subject matter. This improvement also contributed to enhanced academic performance, with test scores indicating a better understanding of science concepts as well as improved skills in analyzing and applying knowledge. Despite challenges such as limited time for lesson preparation and the need for additional support for some students, the majority of teachers at SDN Wangiwisata reported experiencing greater flexibility in designing learning activities that are more responsive to students' interests and needs. Overall, the results of this study indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to improve the quality of IPAS learning at SDN Wangiwisata, although implementation challenges must be addressed through more intensive training and support for both teachers and students.

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