

## Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education and Its Impact on Students' Learning Autonomy at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun

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Dikirim: 26-02-2026; Direvisi: 05-04-2026; Diterima: 08-04-2026

**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education and its impact on student learning independence at the high school level. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis, then analyzed using an interactive model that included data reduction, data presentation, and verification through triangulation. The results showed that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum was reflected in competency-based planning, diagnostic assessment, differentiated learning, and contextual project integration. This transformation encourages an increase in student learning independence, which is seen in the aspects of learning initiative, self-regulation, and metacognitive reflection. Project-based learning and reflective assessment play an important role in strengthening academic responsibility and learning awareness. However, variations in intrinsic motivation and limited facilities are challenges in optimizing implementation. This study confirms that the Merdeka Curriculum has significant potential in developing self-regulated learning in Islamic Religious Education. These findings have practical implications for the development of more autonomous, reflective, and contextual learning strategies in secondary schools.

**Keywords:** Independent Curriculum; Islamic Religious Education; independent learning.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam serta dampaknya terhadap kemandirian belajar siswa di tingkat sekolah menengah atas. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus di SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan analisis dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif yang meliputi reduksi data, penyajian data, dan verifikasi melalui triangulasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka tercermin dalam perencanaan berbasis kompetensi, asesmen diagnostik, pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, dan integrasi proyek kontekstual. Transformasi ini mendorong peningkatan kemandirian belajar siswa yang terlihat pada aspek inisiatif belajar, regulasi diri, dan refleksi metakognitif. Pembelajaran berbasis proyek dan asesmen reflektif berperan penting dalam memperkuat tanggung jawab akademik dan kesadaran belajar. Namun, variasi motivasi intrinsik dan keterbatasan fasilitas menjadi tantangan dalam optimalisasi implementasi. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka memiliki potensi signifikan dalam mengembangkan self-regulated learning dalam pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam. Temuan ini memberikan implikasi praktis bagi pengembangan strategi pembelajaran yang lebih otonom, reflektif, dan kontekstual di sekolah menengah.

**Kata Kunci:** Kurikulum Merdeka; Pendidikan Agama Islam; Kemandirian belajar.

## INTRODUCTION

The transformation of education policy in Indonesia in recent years has been marked by the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum, initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia as a response to the need for learning recovery and quality improvement in the post-pandemic period (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, 2022). This curriculum is designed to promote student-centered learning, strengthen essential competencies, and develop character through the Pancasila Student Profile, including the dimensions of independence and critical reasoning (Rahayu et al., 2022). Conceptually, the Merdeka Curriculum shifts the learning paradigm from a knowledge transmission model toward a constructive process that positions Students' as active subjects in building their own understanding (Mulyasa, 2022). In practice, this transformation requires the restructuring of teachers' roles, instructional design, and assessment systems to become more adaptive and reflective.

The urgency of this transformation cannot be separated from the challenge of Students' low levels of learning autonomy across various educational contexts. Numerous studies indicate that academic success is determined not only by the quality of materials and instructional methods, but also by Students' ability to manage their own learning processes independently (Schunk & Greene, 2018). From the perspective of self-regulated learning, Students' who are able to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning strategies tend to demonstrate better academic performance (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum policy, which emphasizes learning autonomy, differentiation, and formative assessment, holds strategic relevance in fostering the development of learning independence as a 21st-century competency. Without strengthening this dimension, curriculum reform risks becoming merely an administrative change without substantive impact on the quality of the learning process.

Various scholarly studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum from diverse perspectives. Faiz and Purwati highlight structural challenges as well as teachers' readiness in implementing the principle of curriculum flexibility, particularly in instructional planning and assessment (Faiz & Purwati, 2022). Meanwhile, the Merdeka Curriculum is considered to have the potential to enhance students' active participation through the implementation of differentiated instruction and the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile (Notanubun et al., 2025). In the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), several studies indicate that project-based approaches, reflective discussions, and contextual learning foster deeper internalization of values. Overall, these findings demonstrate that instructional designs which provide space for autonomy, differentiation, and self-reflection contribute to character development and to the enhancement of students' self-regulated learning abilities.

Although numerous studies have demonstrated the potential of the Merdeka Curriculum to promote autonomy and self-regulated learning, most of these investigations primarily focus on policy evaluation, curriculum comparison, or the general measurement of learning outcomes (Irsalina et al., 2025). The dimension of learning independence is often positioned as a supplementary variable rather than as the central focus of in-depth and contextual analysis (Arifin, 2024). Studies that specifically explore the implementation experience of the Merdeka Curriculum in



Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at the senior high school level, particularly in non-urban areas, remain relatively limited (Nawawi et al., 2023). In fact, local context, school culture, and resource readiness significantly influence the effectiveness of curriculum implementation (Setiawan & Mulyani, 2023). This gap in contextual research highlights the need to understand how national policy is translated into everyday instructional practices and how such implementation impacts students' learning autonomy.

The need to further examine the relationship between the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and students' learning autonomy is also reinforced by the theoretical foundation of self-regulated learning. (Zimmerman, 2002) asserts that learning independence develops through a cyclical process of planning, performance, and reflection, all of which are influenced by the learning environment. (Jansen, Leeuwen, et al., 2019) found that instructional interventions providing structured self-regulation support significantly mediate improvements in academic performance. In the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), which emphasizes not only cognitive development but also character and value formation, the integration of constructivist and reflective approaches becomes highly relevant (Ilma et al., 2025). Nevertheless, empirical evidence is still needed to demonstrate how project-based learning designs and reflective assessment practices within the Merdeka Curriculum genuinely foster students' learning initiative, discipline, responsibility, and self-reflective capacities.

This study offers novelty in two main aspects. First, it employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in depth the experiences of teachers and students in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding compared to quantitative studies that tend to focus on generalization. Second, the study centers its analysis on the dimension of learning autonomy based on the self-regulated learning framework, thereby providing a more focused conceptual contribution to the existing literature. Thus, this research not only evaluates policy effectiveness but also examines the pedagogical dynamics that shape students' learning independence within a real educational context.

Empirically, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun provides a relevant context for investigation. The school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) for Grade X and Grade XI students. Teachers design competency-based teaching modules that incorporate diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, and end-of-lesson reflection activities (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, 2022). Simple projects and group discussions are employed as the primary strategies to encourage students' active participation (Sulasmiyatningsih et al., 2025). Normatively, this design aligns with the implementation guidelines of the Merdeka Curriculum. However, its effectiveness in fostering students' learning autonomy within a school environment characterized by specific social conditions and resource availability still requires in-depth investigation.

Interestingly, SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun is located in a non-metropolitan area, meaning that the implementation of national policy encounters particular challenges, such as limited facilities and diverse student academic backgrounds. This condition provides an important analytical opportunity to examine how nationally designed policies are adapted within a local context. Islamic Religious Education (PAI)



possesses distinctive characteristics, as it integrates cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions. Therefore, analyzing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI can offer broader insights into the integration of curriculum reform with value-based character formation.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to describe the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun, analyze its impact on students' learning independence, and identify the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation process. By integrating curriculum policy perspectives and self-regulated learning theory (Zimmerman, 2002), this study is expected to contribute both theoretically and empirically to the development of more autonomous, reflective, and contextual PAI learning. Academically, this study strengthens the discourse on the relationship between curriculum implementation and learning independence, while practically, it is expected to serve as a reference for teachers and policymakers, particularly in non-urban school contexts.

The novelty of this study lies in three main aspects. First, it positions learning independence as the primary focus of analysis rather than merely a complementary variable. Second, the use of a qualitative approach with a case study design enables an in-depth and contextual exploration of empirical experiences. Third, this study examines the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in PAI learning within a non-urban school context, which remains underexplored in previous research.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning and its impact on student learning independence. This approach was chosen because it allows for the exploration of meaning, experience, and social dynamics in the context of real learning, rather than simply testing causal relationships statistically. The case study focused on one specific system, namely the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun, thereby producing a comprehensive contextual understanding. Conceptually, this study is based on the assumption that the implementation of curriculum policy is a social process that is influenced by interactions between actors, school culture, and local context, and is closely related to the development of Students' self-regulated learning.

The research subjects included Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, and as well as 30 students from grade X and 28 students from grade XI, selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance and direct involvement in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observation focused on the learning process, teacher–student interactions, as well as project-based activities and reflection sessions. The interviews explored informants experiences and perceptions regarding changes in instructional practices and the development of Students' learning independence. Documentation in the form of teaching modules, instructional plans, project outputs, and reflection journals was analyzed to verify the consistency



between planning and implementation, as well as to assess indicators of Students' self-regulated learning.

Data analysis employed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and continuous conclusion drawing and verification. The data were categorized based on key themes such as lesson planning, project implementation, reflective assessment, and the dimensions of self-initiation, self-regulation, and self-reflection. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, techniques, and time by comparing information obtained from various informants and data collection methods. This approach enabled the integration of empirical findings with the theoretical framework of self-regulated learning and produced an analysis that is credible, contextual, and relevant to the dynamics of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning.

## RESULTS

### 1. Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI)

This study shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the subject of Islamic Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun has undergone changes in the aspects of planning, implementation, as well as assessment and reflection. These changes are reflected in a more flexible learning structure, the use of a differentiated approach, and the integration of values within the learning process.

#### a. Instructional Planning

Based on document analysis and interviews with PAI teachers, learning planning is structured in the form of competency-based teaching modules. These modules include learning objectives, initial diagnostic assessments, differentiation strategies, and reflection components at the end of the lesson.

Diagnostic assessment is used to identify students' initial readiness before the learning process begins. The results of this assessment serve as the basis for determining task variations and the level of material complexity provided to students. Observation data indicate that teachers adjust their instructional strategies based on these assessment results.

In addition, the teaching materials demonstrate the integration of values within the learning objectives. The formulated objectives focus not only on content understanding but also on students' ability to analyze cases and relate them to real-life situations.

#### b. Instructional Implementation

Observation results show that the teacher acts as a facilitator in the learning process. The teacher guides discussions, poses guiding questions, and monitors group work. Learning interactions take place in a dialogic manner, where students are given opportunities to express opinions, ask questions, and respond to their peers' arguments. The methods used include group discussions, case studies, and projects related to students' real-life contexts.

In several activities, students are given the freedom to choose project topics. The selected topics are related to issues relevant to their daily lives. Observation data indicate that students are actively involved in discussions and in completing group tasks.



**c. Assessment and Reflection**

In terms of assessment, the teacher applies a formative approach, which includes reflection journals, project-based assessment, and individual feedback. Reflection journals are used to examine students' learning processes. The data show that students write about their learning experiences, the difficulties they encounter, and the efforts they make to understand the material. Some students also demonstrate the ability to identify their weaknesses and plan improvements. Feedback from the teacher is provided directly on students' work. This feedback is used by students to revise their tasks and improve their understanding. Overall, the learning process shows student involvement across various stages, from planning to reflection.

**2. Impact on Students' Learning Autonomy**

The analysis of interview and observation data indicates a tendency toward changes in students' learning behaviors that reflect learning independence. These findings are not intended to demonstrate a quantitative increase, but rather to describe indications of the development of independent learning characteristics within the learning process. These behaviors can be categorized into three main dimensions: learning initiative, academic responsibility, and self-reflection ability.

**a. Learning Initiative**

Findings related to students' learning initiative based on interview and observation data are presented in the following table:

**Table 1.** Students' Learning Initiative

Data Source	Findings
Interviews	Students stated that they sought additional references from the internet and supplementary books beyond the materials provided by the teacher. Some students reported that the freedom to choose project topics encouraged them to learn more independently according to their interests.
Observations	Students were observed actively seeking additional information during the learning process and group discussions. Some students demonstrated the ability to organize project schedules and set task completion targets.

Based on these data, there is a tendency for students not only to rely on primary learning resources but also to begin exploring information independently. In addition, some students demonstrated the ability to manage their time and plan learning activities in a more structured manner.

**b. Academic Responsibility**

Findings related to students' academic responsibility are presented as follows:

**Table 2.** Students' Academic Responsibility

Data Source	Findings
Interviews	Students stated that they attempted to complete assignments on time and divided roles within groups to make the work more organized.
Observations	Students submit their assignments by the specified deadline. In group work, the division of tasks appears more systematic, and each member contributes according to their respective roles.

These data indicate a tendency toward the development of students' academic responsibility, both in completing individual tasks and in collaborative work. Students began to show awareness of their roles and responsibilities in the learning process.



### c. Self-Reflection Ability

Findings related to students' self-reflection ability are presented in the following table:

**Table 3.** Students' Self-Reflection Ability

Data Source	Findings
Interviews	Students stated that they were aware of difficulties in understanding certain materials and attempted to find ways to overcome them, such as rereading or discussing with peers.
Observations	In reflection journals, students wrote about their learning experiences, difficulties encountered, and strategies to improve understanding. Some students demonstrated the ability to analyze their learning processes.

These findings indicate that students are not only able to identify learning difficulties but also begin to formulate improvement strategies. The reflection carried out leads to more conscious monitoring and evaluation of the learning process.

### 3. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

The success of implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in the Islamic Education (PAI) subject at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun is influenced by several supporting and inhibiting factors. On the supporting side, school management support plays a crucial role. Internal policies that provide room for teacher innovation, along with facilitation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* training, have strengthened teachers' pedagogical capacity.

The training attended by teachers has helped them better understand the concepts of differentiated learning and formative assessment more comprehensively. Students' enthusiasm for project-based learning has also contributed to its successful implementation. Students demonstrated greater interest in contextual learning compared to conventional lecture-based methods. On the other hand, several inhibiting factors were identified, such as limited facilities to support project activities and differences in students' motivation levels. Restricted access to certain learning resources limited the exploration of more complex projects. In addition, not all students demonstrated the same level of independence, requiring teachers to provide additional guidance. Challenges in adapting to the new assessment system also emerged as an obstacle during the early stages of implementation.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun shows a tendency toward the development of students' learning independence, although it still faces several contextual challenges. These findings contribute to the literature on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by providing contextual and in-depth empirical evidence.

## DISCUSSION

### Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the Perspective of PAI Learning

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun shows a tendency toward a shift in instructional practices. This shift is reflected in the changing role of the teacher from the primary source of information to a learning facilitator who provides space for exploration, dialogue, and reflection. Conceptually, this change aligns with the characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum,



which emphasize flexibility, differentiation, and the strengthening of essential competencies (Angga et al., 2022). In the context of PAI, this shift has implications for instructional practices, as the subject has traditionally been associated with normative and lecture-based approaches.

The research results show that PAI teachers have integrated diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, and contextual projects into their teaching modules. This practice aligns with the implementation framework of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which positions assessment as an integral part of the learning process rather than merely a final evaluation tool (Rahayu et al., 2022). Such integration also reflects teachers' pedagogical readiness to translate curriculum policy into classroom practice an aspect identified by (Faiz & Purwati, 2022) as a key factor in successful implementation.

From the perspective of Islamic Education (PAI) learning, the use of discussion methods, case studies, and social projects strengthens the contextualization of values. This finding is consistent with (Susilowati, 2022) research, which shows that the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in PAI learning provides space for more dialogical and reflective approaches in developing students' understanding of religious values. When students are engaged in analyzing ethical cases or practicing tolerance in daily life, they not only understand concepts cognitively but also internalize values through active learning experiences. (Nirwani et al., 2025) further asserts that Project-Based Learning in PAI has the potential to connect normative teachings with students' social realities, thereby enhancing the relevance of religious education.

Furthermore, the implementation of project-based learning that allows students to choose their own themes demonstrates recognition of learner autonomy. This aligns with (Rachmawati, 2023) findings that differentiated learning within the *Kurikulum Merdeka* enables students to develop their potential according to their interests and levels of readiness. Thus, the practices at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun reflect not only compliance with policy but also contextual adaptation that supports pedagogical transformation in PAI.

Nevertheless, such transformation cannot be separated from institutional and school cultural contexts. (Hernawan & Mulyati, 2023) emphasizes that the implementation of a new curriculum requires comprehensive changes in learning culture. In this study, the shift toward participatory learning appears to be supported by a classroom climate that is dialogical and open to differing opinions. This suggests that curriculum reform can serve as a catalyst for broader cultural change in learning when supported by responsive and collaborative school leadership.

### **Impact on Learning Independence**

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is associated with the emergence of a tendency toward students' learning independence, as reflected in the aspects of self-initiation, self-regulation, and self-reflection. These three aspects are aligned with the framework of self-regulated learning developed by (Zimmerman, 2002), which emphasizes the importance of planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation in the learning process. However, these findings are descriptive and qualitative in nature and are not intended to demonstrate a quantitative increase.



The tendency toward self-initiation is evident from interview and observation data indicating that students seek additional learning resources and make use of the freedom to choose project topics. This phenomenon suggests a shift in learning orientation from dependence on teacher instruction toward more independent exploration. Independent learning strategies contribute to academic success, particularly when students have autonomy in determining their learning approaches (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). In the context of this study, the freedom to select project topics and access to various sources of information can be understood as factors that encourage the emergence of such learning initiative.

In terms of self-regulation, the findings indicate students' ability to manage project completion time, create schedules, and organize task distribution in group work. Learning that allows space for self-regulation plays a role in helping students monitor and adjust their learning strategies (Jansen, van Leeuwen, et al., 2019). The formative assessment practices and feedback provided in this study can be positioned as mechanisms supporting this regulation process, although they were not measured quantitatively. These practices not only guide students in staying on track but also encourage them to reflect on the effectiveness of their approaches. Although the impact of these mechanisms was not measured quantitatively, their presence appears to foster greater responsibility and awareness in students regarding their learning.

The self-reflection dimension emerged as the most prominent aspect. Through the reflective journals analyzed in this study, students not only described their learning experiences but also identified difficulties and formulated improvement strategies. Metacognitive reflection is an important component in developing learning autonomy (Schunk & Greene, 2018). In this context, the integration of reflection in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, as seen in students' reflective journals, indicates a tendency for students' awareness of their learning processes to develop.

Nevertheless, this study also found that learning autonomy did not appear uniformly among students. This variation can be linked to differences in academic background and intrinsic motivation. The success of implementing Merdeka Belajar in developing self-regulated learning is highly influenced by students' individual readiness (Hatni et al., 2025). Panadero also emphasizes that learning innovations do not automatically result in autonomy without adequate internal motivation support (Panadero & Broadbent, 2018). Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires adaptive guidance strategies to accommodate the diversity of student characteristics.

In the context of Islamic Religious Education, learning autonomy is not only related to cognitive aspects but also encompasses affective and moral dimensions. The integration of values in PAI learning has the potential to strengthen students' personal responsibility and ethical commitment. The findings of this study indicate that project-based learning and reflection practices may be associated with the development of such value awareness, as reflected in students' academic responsibility during the learning process.

### **Analysis of Supporting and Inhibiting Factors**

The successful implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in this study was influenced by several supporting factors. Teacher readiness in designing innovative learning emerged as a primary factor. (Khalijah & Zuliana, 2024) emphasizes that a



deep understanding of the characteristics of PAI content and the principles of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* determines the quality of instructional design. Teachers who participated in *Kurikulum Merdeka* training demonstrated better competence in applying diagnostic assessment and differentiated instruction. A school culture that supports active student participation also contributed to the success of the implementation. (Wulandari et al., 2024) states that driving schools with transformational leadership tend to be more successful in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. In this study, school management support for instructional innovation created a conducive climate for pedagogical experimentation.

Adequate learning facilities also influenced the effectiveness of contextual project-based learning. However, limitations in certain resources became obstacles to exploring more complex projects. (Mauluda et al., 2025) notes that curriculum innovation often encounters resource constraints, particularly in non-urban areas. This challenge requires teachers to make creative adaptations to ensure that learning objectives are still achieved. Another challenge lies in the transitional period, particularly in adapting to the new assessment system. (Deliana et al., 2025) emphasizes that the paradigm shift in assessment from summative to formative requires adjustment from both teachers and students. In this study, some students initially experienced confusion in understanding the assessment criteria for projects and reflections. However, over time and with consistent feedback, this adaptation gradually improved.

Thus, this discussion shows that the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in PAI learning does not solely depend on curriculum design, but also on the interaction between pedagogical, institutional, and individual factors. The transformation toward more autonomous and reflective learning requires synergy among teacher readiness, school culture, and resource support to optimize its impact on students' learning independence.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 2 Sarolangun has contributed to the development of students' learning independence. This is reflected in the transformation of instructional practices, including the use of differentiated learning, project-based activities, diagnostic assessment, and reflective evaluation, which shift the learning paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches. These practices create opportunities for students to actively engage in planning, managing, and reflecting on their own learning processes.

The findings indicate that students' learning independence is manifested in three main dimensions: learning initiative, academic responsibility, and self-reflection. Students demonstrate a growing tendency to seek additional learning resources, manage tasks collaboratively and responsibly, and evaluate their own learning processes through reflective activities. These findings support the relevance of self-regulated learning theory in explaining how curriculum innovation can foster students' autonomy in learning. However, the development of learning independence is not evenly distributed among students, as it is influenced by variations in motivation, academic background, and learning readiness.



Furthermore, the success of the implementation is supported by several factors, including teachers' pedagogical readiness, school leadership support, and students' positive responses to contextual and project-based learning. On the other hand, challenges such as limited facilities, differences in students' motivation, and the adaptation process to new assessment systems remain significant constraints. These findings suggest that curriculum reform requires not only pedagogical innovation but also institutional support and adaptive strategies to accommodate diverse student characteristics.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing contextual and empirical insights into the relationship between the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and the development of learning independence in PAI learning, particularly in a non-urban school setting. It highlights the importance of integrating autonomy, reflection, and contextual learning in fostering students' self-regulated learning. Future research is recommended to employ mixed-method approaches to measure long-term impacts and to examine the applicability of these findings in different educational contexts.

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