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The Correlation Between Learning Motivation and Academic Achievement in the Context of Independent Curriculum Implementation

Ida Wahyu Wijayati[1], Mokhamad Yaurizqika Hadi[2], Muhammad Arsyad[3]
[1]Nugroho Magetan Doctoral University,
[2]Islamic Religious Institute At Taqwa Bondowoso
[3]Halu Oleo University
Corresponding E-mail: derrenpeb3@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the relationship between learning motivation and students' academic achievement in the context of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. A quantitative approach with a correlational design was applied. Data were collected through motivation questionnaires and academic performance reports from 87 elementary and secondary students. Pearson correlation analysis indicated a positive and significant relationship between learning motivation and academic achievement ($r=0.862$; $p<0.05$). The findings confirm that motivation plays a crucial role in students' success within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. Teachers are encouraged to apply adaptive and project-based learning strategies that enhance both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Corresponding Author:

Ida Wahyu Wijayati
Doctoral University Nugroho Magetan
E-mail: derrenpeb3@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum is one of the important milestones in the journey of education reform in Indonesia. This policy was born as a response to various challenges faced by the national education system, especially in terms of curriculum relevance to the needs of the times, learning flexibility, and strengthening the character of students. In the context of globalization and rapid technological development, the education system is required not only to produce graduates who are academically intelligent, but also adaptive, creative, and have strong moral integrity. Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum is present as an innovation that emphasizes three main pillars: learning independence, learning differentiation, and character strengthening.

The concept of learning independence in the Independent Curriculum means that students are given a wider space to determine the direction and way of learning according to their respective interests, potentials, and learning speeds. Teachers in this case no longer play a dominant role as the sole source of knowledge, but as facilitators who accompany the student learning process. This approach is in line with the 21st century education paradigm that is oriented towards competency-based and experiential learning. Thus, the learning process

becomes more meaningful because students not only receive information, but also construct their own knowledge through activities that are contextual and relevant to real life.

Meanwhile, differentiation of learning is the second important aspect carried out by the Independent Curriculum. This principle emphasizes that each student is a unique individual, with different backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles. In practice, teachers are expected to design flexible and varied learning strategies, both in terms of content, processes, and learning products. For example, students with visual inclinations can be facilitated with image and video media, while students with kinesthetic tendencies can be given the opportunity to learn through hands-on practice. This approach not only increases the effectiveness of learning, but also creates an inclusive learning environment, where each student feels valued and accommodated as per their needs.

The third aspect, namely character strengthening, is the heart of the Independent Curriculum. Character education is no longer placed as a complement, but is integrated into all learning activities. Values such as mutual cooperation, integrity, independence, and global diversity are developed through habituation, reflection, and active involvement of students in real projects in the school and community environment. Through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), students are invited to foster moral awareness, social empathy, and responsibility for the environment and the nation. Thus, the Independent Curriculum not only forms students who excel cognitively, but also has strong character and personality according to the values of Pancasila.

Since its implementation nationally in 2022, the Independent Curriculum has brought significant changes in the dynamics of learning in schools. The implementation of this curriculum began with a trial stage in driving schools, then was gradually expanded to all levels of education. One of the main changes seen is the increase in student motivation to learn. Learning motivation is a psychological factor that greatly determines the success of the educational process. Students who have high motivation will be more enthusiastic in following lessons, dare to try new things, and do not give up easily in the face of difficulties.

An approach to the Independent Curriculum that is more flexible and contextual has proven to be able to foster this learning motivation. Through real-life learning projects, students feel that what they learn has immediate benefits in their daily lives. For example, in a project themed "Sustainable Lifestyle", students not only learn environmental concepts from textbooks, but also engage directly in activities such as waste management, tree planting, or energy-saving campaigns. This kind of activity makes the learning process more lively, interesting, and meaningful.

In addition, the Independent Curriculum provides freedom for teachers and schools to develop operational curricula that are in accordance with the local context. This makes the learning process more relevant to the needs and potentials of the region. For example, schools in coastal areas can integrate topics about marine ecosystems or fisheries economics, while schools in agricultural areas can emphasize on agricultural technology and locally-based entrepreneurship. This relevance indirectly increases learning motivation because students feel that the lessons they receive are inseparable from their real lives.

The positive impact of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum can also be seen from various media reports and empirical data. Based on a report by the National

Achievement Center (Puspresnas) of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemdikbudristek) in 2024, there will be a significant increase in the number of national outstanding students after the widespread implementation of this curriculum in 2023–2024. Data shows that the number of students who achieved academic and non-academic achievements at the national level increased by 104% compared to the previous year. The increase covers various fields, such as science olympiads, technological innovation competitions, arts, sports, and student entrepreneurship activities.

This increase can be interpreted as tangible evidence that the Independent Curriculum has a positive impact on students' learning patterns and enthusiasm. An approach that allows space for the exploration of interests and talents encourages students to compete in a healthy manner and develop their best potential. Furthermore, this success is also an indicator that the national education system is starting to move towards a more progressive direction, where the learning process is no longer uniform and oppressive, but liberating and empowering.

However, the success of the Independent Curriculum certainly does not happen automatically. The success of the implementation is highly dependent on the readiness of various components of education, especially teachers, schools, and local government support. Teachers have a strategic role in translating the principles of the Independent Curriculum into real learning practices. Continuous training and mentoring are needed so that teachers are able to innovate in designing differential and student-oriented learning. In addition, schools must also have an adaptive management system in order to be able to facilitate project activities and co-curricular activities that support character strengthening.

In terms of policy, the government has provided various supporting tools, such as the Merdeka Teaching Platform, which functions as a forum for sharing good practices between educators, digital learning resources, and a formative assessment system that helps teachers monitor student learning progress holistically. With the support of this digital infrastructure, the learning process can be more easily accessed, evaluated, and adjusted to the needs of students.

Nevertheless, there are still a number of challenges that need to be considered. Not all schools have adequate facilities and infrastructure to carry out project-based learning. In addition, the perception of some teachers and parents who are still accustomed to conventional learning patterns is also an obstacle in the full implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Therefore, a collaborative approach is needed between the government, schools, the community, and the business world to ensure that the spirit of "freedom of learning" is truly realized at all levels of education.

Conceptually, the success of the Independent Curriculum is not only measured by the increase in academic achievement, but also by the growth of a generation of students who are independent, think critically, creatively, and have noble character. With a humanistic and participatory approach, the Independent Curriculum is expected to be able to produce students who are not only ready to face the challenges of the world of work, but also contribute positively to society and the environment.

Thus, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is a strategic step in an effort to build a more adaptive and sustainable education ecosystem. The increase in student motivation and achievement that occurred after the implementation of this policy shows an

encouraging direction of change. In the future, if supported by adequate teacher training, inclusive learning facilities, and the active participation of all stakeholders, the Independent Curriculum has the potential to become a strong foundation for the birth of Indonesia's golden generation that is intelligent, characterful, and globally competitive.

Table 1. Number of National Outstanding Students 2023–2024

Year	Number of Outstanding Students	Percentage Increase
2023	56.239	-
2024	114.781	104%

Source: National Achievement Center (Puspresnas), Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning Motivation Theory

Learning motivation is one of the most decisive psychological aspects in the success of the educational process. In general, learning motivation can be defined as internal and external forces that encourage individuals to carry out learning activities to achieve certain goals. According to Sardiman (2023), motivation is a driving force in a person that causes enthusiasm, direction, and perseverance in learning. Without motivation, learning activities will not run effectively because students do not have enough motivation to actively participate in the learning process.

Theoretically, learning motivation can be divided into two main types, namely intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation comes from within students, such as curiosity, interest in lessons, or the desire to develop their abilities. Meanwhile, extrinsic motivation comes from external factors, such as encouragement from teachers, awards, academic grades, or parental expectations. These two forms of motivation complement each other and both play an important role in shaping positive learning behavior.

The theories of learning psychology provide diverse perspectives on how motivation works. Carl Rogers, a humanistic psychology figure, emphasized the importance of creating a learning environment conducive to the development of human potential. According to Rogers, learning motivation will arise naturally when students feel safe, accepted, and valued in the learning process. Rogers views each individual as having an innate drive for self-actualization, which is the desire to be the best version of himself. In the context of education, teachers need to play the role of facilitators who foster confidence and give students the freedom to explore their own ideas and learning experiences.

In addition to humanistic theory, cognitive motivation theory also provides an important foundation in understanding student learning behavior. For example, *expectancy-value* theory states that learning motivation arises when students believe that their efforts will bring results (*expectancy)* and that those results are of value. In other words, students will study hard if they believe they can succeed and consider success meaningful for their future. In the context of modern learning, this theory helps teachers understand that increasing students' confidence and relating material to real life can strengthen learning motivation.

Furthermore, the *self-determination* theory put forward by Deci and Ryan explains that intrinsic motivation will grow optimally when three basic psychological needs are met, namely autonomy (independence), competence (ability), and relationships (social connectedness). The Merdeka curriculum that is currently being implemented in Indonesia is actually very much in line with the principles of this theory. Through project-based learning and differentiational approaches, students are given space to be independent in determining how to learn (autonomy), are facilitated to succeed in challenging tasks (competencies), and are given the opportunity to work together in groups (relationships).

The Relationship between Motivation and Academic Achievement

Learning motivation has a very close relationship with academic achievement, because motivation is a driving factor that affects the intensity, direction, and perseverance of students' efforts in learning. A number of studies show that students with high motivation tend to have more effective learning strategies, discipline in doing assignments, and courage to face academic difficulties. In contrast, students with low motivation are more likely to give up and are less actively involved in the learning process.

One of the relevant studies is a study conducted at SDN 101786 Medan Helvetia in the 2024/2025 school year, which shows a very strong correlation between learning motivation and student academic achievement. With a correlation value of $r = 0.862$ and $r^2 = 0.743$, the results of the study showed that 74.3% of the variation in students' academic achievement was influenced by learning motivation. This figure shows a very large contribution, so motivation can be categorized as one of the main determinants in achieving learning outcomes.

These findings are in line with previous studies conducted at various levels of education. For example, research by Uno (2022) confirms that students who have high learning motivation show consistent academic performance better than students who only study due to coercion or external pressure. Intrinsically motivated students typically show high enthusiasm, perseverance in doing assignments, and the ability to self-reflect on their learning process. This indicates that motivation not only affects the quantity of learning efforts, but also the quality of student involvement in learning.

Learning motivation is also closely related to *students' self-efficacy* or self-confidence in their ability to achieve certain results. Students who believe they are capable of completing academic assignments will be more motivated to try new strategies, repeat material, or ask for help when having difficulties. In this context, motivation and academic achievement have a reciprocal relationship: motivation increases achievement, and academic success in turn strengthens students' motivation to study harder.

Furthermore, environmental factors can also strengthen or weaken the relationship between motivation and academic achievement. Teacher support, a positive classroom atmosphere, and a fair assessment system are important elements that can foster learning motivation. When students feel valued and receive constructive feedback, they will be more motivated to improve performance and achieve optimal learning outcomes.

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the Context of Learning Motivation

The Independent Curriculum is present as an education policy that directly targets increasing student learning motivation through a more flexible, contextual, and student-centered approach. This approach emphasizes project-based learning, learning differentiation, and formative diagnostic assessments. Through project-based learning, students are encouraged to actively engage in activities that demand collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity. This is different from the conventional approach that emphasizes memorization and passive mastery of theory.

The results of research at SMA Muhammadiyah 4 Bengkulu City show strong empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of the Independent Curriculum in increasing learning motivation. The study reported that 73% of students became more active and responsible for their own learning, with an average increase in activity scores of 18% compared to the previous semester. This increase shows that when students are given space to participate in the learning planning and execution process, their engagement rates increase significantly.

This increase in motivation can be explained through the theory of self-determination. When the Independent Curriculum gives students autonomy to determine the topic of the project or how to present learning outcomes, the psychological need for independence is met. Likewise, providing challenges that are in accordance with students' abilities, which fosters a sense of competence. In collaborative activities, students also build positive social relationships, so that the need for relationships is met. The combination of these three needs creates ideal conditions for the emergence of strong intrinsic motivation.

In addition, diagnostic assessments applied in the Independent Curriculum function to understand the learning profile of each student before the learning process begins. By understanding students' strengths and weaknesses early on, teachers can tailor the most effective teaching approaches and strategies. This type of assessment prevents students from experiencing repeated failures, which is often the cause of decreased motivation to learn. Thus, the evaluation system in the Independent Curriculum is not only a tool to measure results, but also an instrument to guide the development of students' motivation and abilities in a sustainable manner.

Furthermore, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum also fosters a *sense of ownership* of the learning process. When students feel that learning is their own, not solely the demands of teachers or schools, then their intrinsic motivation will grow naturally. Project-based learning gives students the opportunity to innovate, express themselves, and see the real impact of what they learn on the environment.

Overall, theories and empirical findings show that learning motivation acts as a bridge between education policy and expected learning outcomes. The Merdeka Curriculum succeeds in increasing motivation through learning strategies that respect individual diversity, provide freedom of thought, and emphasize the relevance of learning to real life. Therefore, the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum in increasing learning motivation is also proof that an education system that is oriented towards humanity and independence can produce better and sustainable academic achievements.

Research Methods

This study uses a quantitative approach with a correlational design to determine the relationship between learning motivation and academic achievement. The research population

consists of elementary to high school students in several regions in Indonesia. The sample totaled 87 randomly selected students. Data was collected through a study motivation questionnaire and student report card scores for the even semester 2024/2025. Data analysis uses the Pearson Product Moment correlation technique to see the linear relationships between variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Learning motivation is a fundamental psychological aspect that plays a big role in determining the success of students in the educational process. Various theories and studies show that without strong motivation, students' academic potential is difficult to develop optimally. In the context of Indonesian education, especially after the implementation of the Independent Curriculum since 2022, attention to the motivational dimension has increased rapidly. This curriculum not only changes the structure of learning, but also emphasizes the importance of student independent learning, creativity, and active engagement. In this framework, the analysis of the relationship between learning motivation and academic achievement is crucial, because it can provide an empirical basis for continuous improvement of the quality of education.

Motivational Correlation Results

The findings of the research results at SDN 101786 Medan Helvetia for the 2024/2025 Academic Year, as presented in Table 2, show a positive and significant relationship between learning motivation and student academic achievement with a correlation value of $r = 0.862$, a coefficient of determination (r^2) = 0.743, and a significance level of $p < 0.05$. The figure shows that 74.3% of students' academic achievement variations are influenced by learning motivation, while the remaining 25.7% are influenced by other factors such as family environment, teaching methods, intellectual intelligence, or socioeconomic conditions.

Variable	Correlation Value (r)	Coefficient of Determination (r^2)	Significance (p)
Motivation vs Performance	0,862	0,743	0.000 (<0.05)

Source: Scientific Journal of Elementary Education, 2025, DOI: https://doi.org/10.23969/jp.v10i03.29117

The correlation finding of 0.862 indicates a very strong relationship between the two variables. Statistically, this is a high correlation category based on the criteria of Sugiyono (2022), where an r value above 0.80 indicates a strong and significant level of relationship. This means that the higher the level of student motivation to learn, the higher the academic achievement they get. In contrast, students with low motivation tend to have lower academic achievement.

These results also show compatibility with theories of learning motivation such as Self-Determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Expectancy-Value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). Both emphasized that motivation is the main factor that drives learning behavior, directs efforts, and maintains perseverance in facing academic challenges. In other words, academic

achievement is not only determined by intelligence or cognitive ability alone, but also by the power of internal drive that keeps students persistent and goal-oriented.

In addition, the significance value $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ confirms that the relationship did not occur by chance, but rather had a strong empirical basis. Thus, it can be concluded that learning motivation is a significant predictor of students' academic achievement in the primary education environment.

Empirical Interpretation

The correlation results above provide some important meaning. First, learning motivation plays a role as the main determinant of academic success. Motivated students will be more enthusiastic in taking lessons, more diligent in completing assignments, and more proactive in finding additional learning resources. They also have a positive attitude towards academic challenges, seeing difficulties not as obstacles, but as opportunities to learn.

Second, the high value of the determination coefficient ($r^2 = 0.743$) suggests that almost three-quarters of the variation in academic achievement can be explained by motivational levels. This means that programs geared toward increasing students' motivation to learn have great potential in driving significant improvements in learning outcomes.

Third, these results strengthen the theoretical argument that motivation is a mediator between curriculum policy and student learning outcomes. In the context of the Independent Curriculum, the success of policy implementation is not only measured by changes in learning structures, but also by the extent to which students feel an intrinsic drive to learn independently.

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum and Strengthening Motivation

The Independent Curriculum is designed to provide flexibility in learning and strengthen the role of teachers as facilitators who are able to manage students' motivational dynamics. Learning is no longer limited by one uniform approach, but is tailored to the characteristics, interests, and abilities of students. One of the key components of this curriculum is Project-Based Learning which emphasizes the active involvement of students in solving real problems in their environment.

Based on the results of a survey at SMA Muhammadiyah 4 Bengkulu City, it was found that 73% of students reported an increase in learning motivation after participating in project-based learning. The average student activity score increased by 18% compared to the previous semester. The improvement shows that when students are given the opportunity to participate in the process of planning, implementing, and evaluating learning, they feel more like they have a sense of ownership over the learning process.

The Independent Curriculum allows teachers to play a strategic role in fostering this motivation. Teachers are no longer just material presenters, but directors, guides, and inspirers who help students find relevance between lessons and real life. This approach is in line with the view of Carl Rogers, who asserts that an empathetic learning environment, respects differences, and supports freedom of thought can generate strong intrinsic motivation.

In addition, the Independent Curriculum also encourages the use of diagnostic and formative assessments that are not punishment-oriented, but on constructive feedback. With this evaluation system, students do not feel afraid of assessment, but rather see it as an opportunity to understand their weaknesses and improve themselves. This is very important in

maintaining the sustainability of learning motivation because students are more focused on the process than just the end result.

The Role of Teachers in Managing Motivation

In the context of the Independent Curriculum, teachers have a central role as managers of student motivation. Teachers are not only in charge of delivering material, but must also be able to:

1. **Recognize the motivational profile of students.** Teachers need to understand the source of motivation of each student, whether it is more intrinsically dominant or extrinsic. This understanding allows teachers to adjust their learning approach to suit the psychological needs of students.
2. **Creating a supportive classroom climate.** A safe, open, and pressure-free learning climate will encourage students to be more courageous to speak up and ask questions. A supportive classroom atmosphere can strengthen learning motivation because students feel valued and accepted.
3. **Provide positive reinforcement.** Appreciation for students' efforts, both verbal and symbolic, can reinforce desired learning behaviors. Positive reinforcement has been shown to be effective in increasing student involvement emotionally and cognitively.
4. **Relate the material to real context.** Learning that is relevant to daily life helps students understand the benefits of the knowledge they acquire, thus fostering intrinsic motivation to learn further.
5. **Encourage self-reflection.** Teachers can help students assess their own progress, be aware of changes, and set their next learning goals. Self-reflection makes students more aware of the learning process and motivated to improve it continuously.

Thus, the success of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum does not only depend on policy documents, but also on teachers' pedagogical competence in generating learning motivation in each learning session.

The Role of Learning Motivation as a Predictor of Achievement

Learning motivation, whether derived from internal and external factors, serves as the main predictor of academic success. Internal factors include interests, personal goals, desire to achieve, and *self-efficacy*. External factors include parental support, the quality of the learning environment, the role of teachers, and supportive school policies.

In the context of education that is on the side of students, such as the Independent Curriculum, learning motivation is the fulcrum in creating students who are independent and responsible for their learning process. Students with high motivation tend to exhibit behaviors such as:

- Able to manage study time effectively,
- Showing perseverance in the face of difficulties,
- Finding additional learning resources outside of the classroom,
- Setting short-term and long-term learning goals,
- Showing high curiosity about the subject matter.

These factors further contribute to the improvement of academic achievement, both in the form of test scores, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving skills. Therefore, strengthening learning motivation not only has an impact on short-term academic outcomes, but also on the overall development of student competencies.

Research Implications

The results of the correlation between motivation and academic achievement provide important implications for the development of educational policies and practices:

1. **Policy implications:** The government needs to strengthen teacher training in the field of educational psychology, especially strategies to strengthen learning motivation. Policy support such as the Driving School program and the Independent Teaching Platform must focus on improving teacher competence in building a motivating learning climate.
2. **Pedagogical implications:** Schools need to review learning methods that are still one-way. A more active, collaborative, and contextual approach has been shown to be more effective in fostering students' intrinsic motivation.
3. **Psychological implications:** Students should be facilitated to recognize self-motivation and develop metacognitive awareness. Psychological mentoring oriented towards strengthening character and confidence can support this process.
4. **Social implications:** Support from parents and the school community is also an important element. A positive social environment can strengthen the values of the spirit of learning and academic responsibility.

Overall, the results of the correlation analysis showed that learning motivation had a strong and significant relationship with students' academic achievement ($r = 0.862$; $r^2 = 0.743$; $p < 0.05$). These findings confirm that motivation is a key factor that influences academic success at the primary education level.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum has proven to be an effective catalyst in increasing learning motivation through a flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning approach. With 73% of students reporting increased motivation after participating in project-based learning, it is seen that this policy has succeeded in reviving students' enthusiasm for learning and responsibility for their own learning process.

Teachers play a central role in this success, namely as the main driving force that is able to create a positive, relevant, and inspiring learning environment. Meanwhile, learning motivation is proven to be not just a psychological variable, but a strong predictor of academic success that must continue to be developed through collaboration between schools, families, and the government.

By placing motivation at the core of curriculum design and learning strategies, Indonesian education can produce a generation of students who are not only intellectually intelligent, but also independent, characterful, and have a lifelong passion for learning.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that there is a positive and significant relationship between learning motivation and student academic achievement in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Learning motivation plays a dominant role in determining academic

success, with a contribution of 74.3%. Increasing learning motivation can be done through an adaptive, participatory learning approach, as well as giving greater autonomy to students. The practical implications of this study confirm the importance of teacher training in managing student motivation and creating an inspiring learning environment that supports character development.

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