Journal of Social Work and Science Education
Volume 7 (3) 2026, 2369-2382
E-ISSN 2723-6919, P-ISSN 2746-0827

The Influence of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation and Teacher Motivation on Student Academic Achievement in Rural Indonesian Senior High Schools

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Article History: Received on 22 April 2026, Revised on 25 June 2026, Published on 27 June 2026

Abstract: This quantitative correlational study examined the influence of curriculum implementation and teacher motivation on student academic achievement at SMA Negeri 1 Semendawai Barat, South Sumatra, Indonesia, during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Data were collected from 41 teachers and principals using validated Likert-scale questionnaires (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.982$ for curriculum, 0.942 for motivation, 0.927 for achievement) and documented academic records. Multiple regression analysis revealed that curriculum implementation significantly predicted student achievement ($\beta = 0.824$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 67.9% of the variance. Teacher motivation also demonstrated significant predictive power ($\beta = 0.742$, $p < 0.001$). Simultaneously, both variables accounted for 76.9% of the variance in student academic achievement ($F = 100.086$, $p < 0.001$). These findings highlight that curriculum reform effectiveness depends on motivated teachers who can translate policy into meaningful classroom practice. The study contributes empirical evidence from an under-researched rural Indonesian context and offers practical implications for curriculum leadership, teacher professional development, and instructional supervision in similar settings. School improvement efforts should integrate curriculum strengthening with teacher motivation strategies rather than addressing them separately.

Keywords: Academic Achievement, Curriculum Implementation, Merdeka Curriculum, Rural School, Teacher Motivation

A. Introduction

Improving student academic achievement remains a central agenda in educational management because achievement reflects not only student ability, but also the effectiveness of school leadership, curriculum implementation, teacher professionalism, learning resources, and classroom interaction (Lu et al., 2024; Ndhego et al., 2026). In Indonesia, this agenda has become more urgent as schools adapt to curriculum transformation, particularly the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Kusumawati & Umam, 2025). The curriculum provides direction for learning objectives, content selection, instructional strategies, assessment, and the

development of student competencies. However, curriculum reform will not automatically improve learning outcomes if it is not supported by motivated teachers who understand the curriculum and are willing to translate it into meaningful classroom practice (Sepadi, 2024; Sullanmaa et al., 2024).

The context of SMA Negeri 1 Semendawai Barat is relevant for examining this issue because the school represents a public senior high school operating in a rural area of South Sumatra. Rural schools often face distinctive challenges, such as limited digital infrastructure, restricted access to external training, uneven availability of learning resources, and heavy administrative workloads for teachers. In such a context, curriculum implementation is not merely a technical process of using national documents; it is an organizational process that requires teacher commitment, school leadership support, and continuous professional learning (Lovett et al., 2026). The thesis data indicate that the school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and related project-based learning activities, but still faces constraints in digital facilities, teacher training, and adaptation to assessment and project-based learning practices (Harjanti et al., 2026; Syofyan et al., 2024).

Curriculum theory emphasizes that a curriculum should be systematically designed, implemented, and evaluated (Haagen-schützenhöfer & Hopf, 2020). Tyler (1949/2023) argues that curriculum development requires clear educational objectives, selected learning experiences, effective organization of learning activities, and evaluation of learning outcomes. Curriculum is not limited to a list of subjects; rather, it represents a structured and planned framework of learning experiences that supports the development of students' knowledge, attitudes, skills, and character. Within the Merdeka Curriculum, this idea is reflected in greater flexibility, differentiated learning, and project-based activities intended to strengthen student competencies and character.

Nevertheless, curriculum effectiveness depends heavily on teachers (Counihan et al., 2022). Teachers are the key actors who interpret curriculum objectives, design instruction, manage classroom activities, assess student learning, and provide feedback (Ross et al., 2026). Teacher motivation therefore becomes a strategic factor. Motivation is commonly understood as internal and external encouragement that moves teachers to perform their professional duties optimally (Kumar, n.d.; Zhang et al., 2021). Teacher motivation refers to the internal and external drive that encourages teachers to carry out their professional duties with responsibility, enthusiasm, and persistence (Orsini et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2021). Self-Determination Theory emphasizes that motivation is enhanced when individuals experience autonomy in decision-making, competence in performing tasks, and relatedness with others in their social environment (Chen et al., 2025). In schools, teachers who feel professionally supported are more likely to design creative lessons, guide students patiently, and maintain high expectations.

Previous research supports the relationship between curriculum, teacher motivation, and student learning outcomes. Studies on the Merdeka Curriculum report that curriculum implementation is associated with better student understanding and learning achievement when teachers are able to design relevant, student-centered, and project-based instruction. Research on teacher motivation also indicates that motivated teachers tend to use more effective teaching strategies, build stronger teacher-student relationships, and create classroom environments that support learning engagement. However, many studies examine curriculum implementation or teacher motivation separately. Empirical studies that analyze both variables simultaneously in a rural senior high school context remain limited (Harjanti et al., 2026).

This study addresses that gap by examining the partial and simultaneous influence of curriculum implementation and teacher motivation on student academic achievement at SMA Negeri 1 Semendawai Barat. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on a rural public senior high school context and its attempt to connect curriculum implementation with teacher motivation as two complementary determinants of student achievement. This study was guided by the following research questions: 1) Does curriculum implementation significantly influence student academic achievement in a rural Indonesian senior high school? 2) Does teacher motivation significantly influence student academic achievement? 3) Do curriculum implementation and teacher motivation simultaneously influence student academic achievement? Based on the theoretical and empirical literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Curriculum implementation has a positive and significant influence on student academic achievement.
H2: Teacher motivation has a positive and significant influence on student academic achievement.
H3: Curriculum implementation and teacher motivation simultaneously have a positive and significant influence on student academic achievement.

Curriculum Implementation and Student Achievement

Curriculum implementation refers to the extent to which curriculum plans are translated into learning practices in schools. A curriculum becomes meaningful only when teachers use it to plan instruction, select learning materials, apply appropriate methods, assess students fairly, and provide learning experiences that are relevant to student needs. In the Indonesian context, the Merdeka Curriculum encourages flexibility, essential competencies, differentiated learning, and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project. These components require teachers and schools to move beyond routine content delivery toward learning that develops critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, and character (Roseni et al., 2024).

Student academic achievement is often measured through academic scores, mastery of learning objectives, and performance in school assessment. Achievement is influenced by internal student factors and external educational factors. Curriculum belongs to the external system that shapes learning opportunities. A curriculum that is well organized, relevant, and supported by appropriate learning resources can make learning more structured and meaningful. Conversely, a curriculum that is not understood by teachers or not supported by adequate facilities may create confusion and reduce instructional effectiveness (Alfayez, 2022).

In this study, curriculum implementation is reflected in indicators such as the relevance of curriculum content to student needs, the suitability of teaching methods with curriculum demands, the availability of supporting facilities, the alignment of assessment with curriculum principles, the development of student competencies, and the flexibility of curriculum implementation. These indicators are important because they represent the pathway through which curriculum design becomes classroom experience (L. Wang et al., 2026).

Teacher Motivation and Student Achievement

Teacher motivation is a psychological and organizational factor that influences how teachers prepare lessons, deliver instruction, interact with students, and improve their professional competence. Motivated teachers are generally more persistent, innovative, disciplined, and committed to student success. Motivation may arise from intrinsic factors, such as professional pride, responsibility, achievement, and satisfaction, as well as extrinsic factors, such as leadership support, school climate, recognition, welfare, and opportunities for career development (Ye et al., 2025).

Motivation theory helps explain why teacher motivation matters for student learning. Self-Determination Theory suggests that motivation becomes stronger when teachers experience autonomy in teaching, feel competent, and develop positive relationships in the school environment. McClelland's achievement motivation theory emphasizes the need for achievement, responsibility, and excellence. Herzberg's two-factor theory distinguishes motivational factors related to the meaning of the job from hygiene factors related to working conditions. In the school context, these theories suggest that motivated teachers will be more likely to improve instruction and support students consistently (Lin & Lee, 2025).

The indicators of teacher motivation in this study include persistence in preparing and implementing learning, enthusiasm in delivering materials, willingness to develop oneself and innovate in instruction, dedication in guiding students, responsibility in carrying out professional duties, and discipline in teaching. These indicators connect teacher motivation directly with classroom quality and student learning experiences.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The conceptual framework positions curriculum implementation and teacher motivation as two independent variables that influence student academic achievement. Curriculum provides the structure and direction of learning, while teacher motivation determines the quality and consistency of curriculum enactment in the classroom. The interaction of these two variables is expected to create effective instruction and improve student achievement. Based on this framework, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Curriculum implementation has a positive and significant influence on student academic achievement.

H2: Teacher motivation has a positive and significant influence on student academic achievement.

H3: Curriculum implementation and teacher motivation simultaneously have a positive and significant influence on student academic achievement.

B. Methods

This study used a quantitative approach with a correlational research design. The quantitative approach was selected because the study aimed to measure the statistical influence of curriculum implementation and teacher motivation on student academic achievement. The correlational design was appropriate because the researcher did not manipulate the variables, but measured naturally occurring relationships among the variables.

The study was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Semendawai Barat, located in Kangkung Village, Semendawai Barat District, OKU Timur Regency, South Sumatra, Indonesia. The research was implemented from January to April 2026. The school was selected because it had implemented curriculum reform and had conditions relevant to the variables of curriculum implementation, teacher motivation, and student academic achievement.

The population consisted of principals and teachers at public senior high schools in Semendawai Barat. The study sample consisted of 41 respondents from SMA Negeri 1 Semendawai Barat, consisting of 12 male respondents and 29 female respondents. A saturated sampling technique was used, meaning that all available members of the target population at the school were included as respondents. This technique was appropriate because the population was relatively small and the researcher intended to obtain data that represented the actual school context.

Data were collected using questionnaires and documentation. The questionnaire was used to measure curriculum implementation and teacher motivation through a Likert scale. The student achievement variable was measured using documented academic achievement data. Before analysis, the instruments were tested for validity and

reliability. The reliability coefficients were high: 0.982 for curriculum implementation, 0.942 for teacher motivation, and 0.927 for student achievement, indicating that the instruments were reliable for research use.

Data analysis was carried out using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the characteristics of each variable. Classical assumption tests included normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homogeneity tests. Hypothesis testing used simple regression for the partial influence of each independent variable and multiple regression with an F-test for the simultaneous influence of curriculum implementation and teacher motivation on student academic achievement. Because the design was correlational and cross-sectional, the term influence in this manuscript should be interpreted as statistical predictive influence rather than experimental causality (X. Wang & Cheng, 2020).

Table 1. Research variables, indicators, and data sources

Variable	Indicators	Data source
Curriculum implementation (X1)	Relevance of content; suitability of methods; supporting facilities; assessment alignment; student competency development; flexibility of implementation	Teacher questionnaire
Teacher motivation (X2)	Persistence; teaching enthusiasm; self-development and innovation; dedication in guiding students; responsibility; teaching discipline	Teacher questionnaire
Student academic achievement (Y)	Documented academic achievement scores and learning achievement information	School documentation

C. Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive analysis indicates that curriculum implementation, teacher motivation, and student academic achievement were generally in the moderate to good category (Hart et al., 2024). The mean score for curriculum implementation was 106.94, with a standard error of 0.554. The mean score for teacher motivation was 92.05, with a standard error of 0.488. The mean score for student academic achievement was 106.75, with a standard error of 0.501. These results suggest that the school had a relatively stable level of curriculum implementation and teacher motivation, although several areas still required improvement (Boudouaia et al., 2024).

The category distribution shows that curriculum implementation was dominated by the sufficient category, teacher motivation was also dominated by the sufficient category, and student achievement was mostly in the sufficient and good categories. This pattern is important because it indicates that the school has a foundation for

improvement, but has not yet reached consistently high performance across all respondents (Hammond et al., 2025).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and category distribution

Variable	N	Mean	Std. error	Dominant category	Dominant frequency
Curriculum implementation	41	106.94	0.554	Sufficient	18 respondents (42.8%)
Teacher motivation	41	92.05	0.488	Sufficient	14 respondents (34.8%)
Student academic achievement	41	106.75	0.501	Sufficient	14 respondents (33.3%)

Classical Assumption Testing

The regression assumptions were tested before hypothesis testing. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that all variables were normally distributed, with significance values above 0.05. The linearity test showed that the relationships between curriculum implementation and student achievement, as well as teacher motivation and student achievement, were linear. The multicollinearity test indicated that the two independent variables did not have problematic multicollinearity because the tolerance value was 0.721 and the VIF value was 1.387. The homogeneity test also showed significance values above 0.05. Therefore, the data met the assumptions required for regression analysis.

Table 3. Classical assumption test summary

Test	Result	Interpretation
Normality	$p > 0.05$ for all variables	Normally distributed
Linearity	Deviation $p = 0.327$ (X1-Y); 0.401 (X2-Y)	Linear relationships
Multicollinearity	Tolerance = 0.721; VIF = 1.387	No multicollinearity
Homogeneity	$p = 0.452$ (X1); 0.363 (X2)	Homogeneous variance

Hypothesis Testing

The first hypothesis examined the influence of curriculum implementation on student academic achievement. The regression result showed that curriculum implementation had a positive and significant influence on student achievement ($B = 0.745$, Beta = 0.824, $t = 11.344$, $p < 0.001$). This means that an increase in curriculum implementation quality was associated with higher student achievement. The positive coefficient indicates that curriculum implementation contributes positively to the academic achievement of students (Hasibuan et al., 2026).

The second hypothesis examined the influence of teacher motivation on student academic achievement (Hu & Qian, 2025). The regression result showed that teacher motivation had a positive and significant influence on student achievement ($B = 0.763$, Beta = 0.742, $t = 8.648$, $p < 0.001$). This means that higher teacher motivation was associated with higher student achievement. Teachers with stronger motivation are more likely to prepare lessons carefully, teach with enthusiasm, guide students consistently, and develop more effective classroom practices.

The third hypothesis examined the simultaneous influence of curriculum implementation and teacher motivation on student academic achievement. The F-test indicated that the combined model was significant ($F = 100.086$, $p < 0.001$). Based on the available ANOVA output, the regression sum of squares was 755.485 and the total sum of squares was 981.937; therefore, the model accounted for approximately 76.9 percent of the total variance. This suggests that curriculum implementation and teacher motivation together provide a strong predictive contribution to student academic achievement.

Table 4. Hypothesis testing summary

Hypothesis	Predictor(s)	B	Beta	t/F	Sig.	Decision
H1	Curriculum implementation -> student achievement	0.745	0.824	t = 11.344	0.000	Accepted
H2	Teacher motivation -> student achievement	0.763	0.742	t = 8.648	0.000	Accepted
H3	Curriculum implementation and teacher motivation -> student achievement	-	-	F = 100.086	0.000	Accepted

Discussion

The results demonstrate that curriculum implementation is a significant predictor of student academic achievement. This finding supports the view that curriculum quality is central to learning effectiveness. A curriculum that is relevant to student needs, supported by appropriate teaching methods, aligned with assessment, and supported by facilities can help students understand learning materials more effectively (Mashingaidze & Mayayise, 2025). In the context of SMA Negeri 1 Semendawai Barat, curriculum implementation appears to provide an instructional structure that guides teachers and students toward clearer learning goals.

This result is consistent with curriculum development theory, which argues that the curriculum functions as a planned educational experience. Tyler (1949/2023) emphasizes that curriculum design should begin with clear educational objectives and continue with the selection and organization of learning experiences and evaluation. When these elements are coherent, the teaching and learning process becomes more systematic. In the Merdeka Curriculum context, coherence is reflected in essential learning outcomes, flexibility, differentiated learning, and projects that develop student competencies. The significant coefficient for curriculum implementation in this study indicates that these elements can contribute to student achievement when they are implemented effectively (Zeng & Zeng, 2024).

However, the descriptive results also show that the dominant category for curriculum implementation was sufficient rather than very good. This suggests that the school has implemented the curriculum but still needs improvement in several aspects. Rural schools may need more systematic assistance in translating curriculum documents

into lesson plans, project-based learning activities, formative assessment practices, and learning resources. Curriculum reform cannot rely only on policy dissemination. It requires ongoing mentoring, collaborative lesson planning, school-based evaluation, and instructional supervision.

The second finding indicates that teacher motivation significantly predicts student academic achievement. This supports motivational theories and previous studies showing that teacher motivation influences classroom quality. Teachers who have high motivation are more likely to show persistence, discipline, enthusiasm, creativity, and dedication in guiding students. These behaviors can improve student engagement, classroom atmosphere, and learning consistency. In turn, students are more likely to achieve better academic outcomes.

Self-Determination Theory offers a useful explanation for this finding. Motivation develops when individuals are supported by autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their personal or professional environment (Zhu et al., 2026). Teachers who feel trusted to design instruction, supported in developing their competence, and connected to colleagues and students may show stronger intrinsic motivation. Similarly, Herzberg's two-factor theory suggests that both motivational factors and working conditions matter. This means that schools should not only ask teachers to work harder, but should create organizational conditions that make professional motivation sustainable (Chudgar, 2026).

The teacher motivation result is practically important because the category distribution shows that teacher motivation was also dominated by the sufficient category, with a considerable proportion of respondents in the low category. This pattern suggests that school leaders need to strengthen motivational support through recognition, fair workload distribution, academic supervision, professional development, and a collaborative school climate. Teacher motivation should be treated as a strategic school management issue, not merely as an individual attitude (Mugwaze & Smith, 2024).

The simultaneous regression result shows that curriculum implementation and teacher motivation together significantly predict student academic achievement. This finding is theoretically meaningful because it indicates that curriculum and teacher motivation are complementary. Curriculum provides the formal direction of learning, while teacher motivation determines whether the curriculum is enacted with energy, creativity, and responsibility. A well-designed curriculum without motivated teachers may remain a document. Conversely, motivated teachers still need a clear and relevant curriculum to organize learning effectively (Kostøl & Remmen, 2022). This finding is aligned with educational productivity theory, which views student achievement as the product of multiple interacting factors, including instructional quality, student characteristics, teacher behavior, and learning environment. The finding also supports a systemic view of school improvement. Improving student

achievement requires integrated action: curriculum strengthening, teacher development, instructional supervision, learning resource provision, and school culture building.

The model explained 76.9% of the variance in student academic achievement, indicating that curriculum implementation and teacher motivation made a strong statistical contribution to the model. Nevertheless, this result should be interpreted carefully because the study used a correlational cross-sectional design and involved a relatively small sample from one school. The result shows strong predictive association, but does not prove experimental causality. Future research should use larger samples, multiple schools, longitudinal data, and additional variables such as student motivation, family support, learning facilities, principal leadership, and teacher competence (Localized, 2024).

For practice, the results imply that SMA Negeri 1 Semendawai Barat and similar rural schools should develop integrated school improvement programs. Curriculum implementation can be strengthened through teacher workshops, peer lesson study, project-based learning mentoring, assessment literacy training, and regular curriculum evaluation. Teacher motivation can be strengthened through recognition systems, supportive leadership, professional learning communities, reduced unnecessary administrative burden, and opportunities for career development. These efforts should be implemented together because curriculum quality and teacher motivation reinforce each other.

D. Conclusions

This study investigated the influence of curriculum implementation and teacher motivation on student academic achievement at a rural Indonesian senior high school implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings demonstrate that both variables significantly predict student achievement, both individually and collectively, with the combined model explaining 76.9% of the variance. These results provide empirical support for theoretical frameworks emphasizing the interdependence of curriculum quality and teacher motivation in determining educational outcomes. The study makes several contributions to educational knowledge. First, it addresses an empirical gap by examining curriculum implementation and teacher motivation simultaneously in a rural Indonesian context, where most prior research has focused on urban settings or examined these variables separately. Second, it provides evidence that the Merdeka Curriculum's effectiveness depends not only on policy design but also on teacher motivation and capacity to implement it. Third, it demonstrates that curriculum and teacher motivation function as complementary rather than competing factors, supporting a systemic perspective on school improvement. For practice, the findings imply that school leaders should adopt integrated strategies addressing both curriculum implementation and teacher motivation. Specific recommendations include: (1) establishing professional learning communities for collaborative

curriculum planning; (2) providing ongoing mentoring for project-based learning and differentiated instruction; (3) implementing recognition systems that acknowledge teacher effort and innovation; (4) reducing unnecessary administrative burdens to allow focus on instructional quality; and (5) creating supportive school climates that foster teacher autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The study's limitations cross-sectional design, single-school sample, and reliance on self-report measures suggest cautious interpretation. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, larger samples across multiple rural schools, and mixed-methods approaches to capture contextual nuances. Investigating the mediating role of teacher competence and the moderating role of principal leadership would further illuminate the mechanisms linking curriculum, motivation, and achievement. Ultimately, improving student achievement in rural schools requires simultaneous attention to curriculum quality and teacher motivation within supportive organizational environments.

E. Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the principal, teachers, staff, and all members of SMA Negeri 1 Semendawai Barat, Indonesia, for their support, cooperation, and participation throughout the research process. Their openness, assistance, and valuable contributions greatly supported the completion of this study, which examines the influence of curriculum implementation and teacher motivation on student academic achievement. The authors also extend their deepest appreciation to Universitas PGRI Palembang, Indonesia, for its academic support, guidance, and encouragement during the preparation and completion of this research article. The scholarly direction, constructive feedback, and professional assistance received have significantly contributed to the development and refinement of this study. Finally, the authors would like to thank all parties who directly and indirectly contributed to the successful completion of this research. Their support and encouragement have been highly meaningful in completing this article.

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