Implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum in Islamic Cultural History Instruction to Enhance Student Collaboration: A Case Study of Grade 7 at MTs Al-Iman Unit 2 Tulang Bawang

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar, KMB) in the Islamic Cultural History (SKI) subject as a medium to develop collaborative learning among seventh-grade students at MTs Al-Iman Unit 2 Tulang Bawang. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study method, data were gathered through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, and analysis of instructional documents. The findings indicate that KMB principles have been adopted effectively in SKI instruction by utilizing student-centered learning, active methodologies, and varied media. Collaborative strategies such as group discussions, project-based learning, and peer-assisted learning were visibly employed, resulting in increased student engagement, improved critical thinking and communication skills, and strengthened responsibility among learners. These outcomes reflect the integration of 21st-century skills within religious education and align with the broader vision of the "Profil Pelajar Pancasila." The study concludes that the successful integration of KMB in SKI learning contributes not only to academic outcomes but also to character formation and interpersonal competence. It recommends continued teacher training, increased access to diverse learning resources, and improved evaluation frameworks to sustain and scale collaborative learning in Islamic education settings.

Keywords: *Merdeka Curriculum, SKI, collaborative learning, student engagement, Pancasila Student Profile*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Indonesia's national education policy has undergone a transformative shift through the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Learning Curriculum), which emphasizes student-centered learning, differentiated instruction, and the development of 21st-century competencies. This curriculum seeks to empower learners with not only academic knowledge but also critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and character development (Kemendikbudristek, 2020). In contrast to previous curricula that were often rigid and teacher-directed, the Independent Learning Curriculum promotes learning autonomy and flexibility by aligning teaching methods with students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This shift is especially relevant for Islamic-based schools such as MTs (Madrasah Tsanawiyah), which are now challenged to contextualize Islamic subjects within competency-based learning frameworks. The curriculum's emphasis on the Profil Pelajar Pancasila—including values such as faith, global diversity, mutual

cooperation, and independence—further integrates religious and civic education as a unified goal of national development.

One of the most essential competencies promoted by the Independent Learning Curriculum is collaboration. In the context of global education reform, collaborative learning is seen as a foundational skill for preparing students to navigate complex social and professional environments (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Collaboration in the classroom involves students working together to solve problems, complete tasks, and construct understanding through dialogue and interaction (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). For Islamic education, this competency has profound theological and pedagogical relevance. The Qur'an and Hadith repeatedly emphasize ta'awun (mutual cooperation) and ukhuwah (brotherhood) as central moral imperatives. Thus, integrating collaborative learning into Islamic subjects such as Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam (SKI) not only fulfills curricular objectives but also aligns with foundational Islamic values.

Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam (SKI) is a core subject in madrasah curricula that focuses on the historical development of Islamic civilization, the biographies of prophets and scholars, as well as the spread of Islamic culture and values. Traditionally, SKI has been taught through lecture-based methods and textbook reading, which often results in passive learning and limited student engagement. However, as studies by Huda et al. (2017) and Maulana (2020) suggest, when SKI is delivered through interactive and student-centered strategies, it can stimulate critical historical thinking, deepen students' appreciation for Islamic heritage, and encourage the application of moral lessons in daily life. This makes SKI an ideal medium for implementing collaborative learning, especially when facilitated through group projects, peer dialogue, and inquiry-based tasks.

The integration of collaborative learning within SKI under the Independent Learning Curriculum requires a reorientation of pedagogical practices. Teachers must move beyond the role of content transmitters to become facilitators of learning processes, capable of designing learning experiences that promote student interaction, reflection, and co-construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). In this framework, students are encouraged to work in groups, assume shared responsibility, and articulate their ideas in respectful and meaningful ways. These activities foster not only cognitive growth but also emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. However, implementing such practices in Islamic education classrooms presents unique challenges—ranging from limited training in collaborative pedagogy to rigid classroom norms and resource constraints.

At MTs Al-Iman Unit 2 Tulang Bawang, the implementation of KMB in SKI has opened new pedagogical possibilities, particularly in terms of collaborative learning. Preliminary observations suggest that the school has begun to adopt differentiated tasks, group assignments, and active learning formats in SKI lessons. Students are increasingly engaged in discussions, presentations, and creative projects that require teamwork and peer evaluation. This context provides a fertile ground for empirical investigation into how collaborative learning is structured, experienced, and perceived by students and teachers. Moreover, understanding the opportunities and constraints of this process can offer valuable insights for other madrasah institutions undergoing similar curriculum transitions.

Empirical research on the integration of collaborative learning in Islamic education remains relatively limited. Most studies have focused on general subjects such as science and language, leaving a gap in the literature on religious and cultural subjects like SKI. For instance, Fitriyani (2020) found that collaborative techniques

improved student participation in PAI (Islamic Religious Education), but did not explore specific historical content. Similarly, Wahyuni (2022) emphasized the role of cooperative learning in character development, yet did not address the curriculum alignment within KMB. Thus, the current study contributes novelty by focusing explicitly on how collaborative learning is implemented within SKI under the new curriculum model, offering a case-specific analysis in a rural Islamic school setting.

Theoretically, this research is grounded in socio-constructivist learning theory, which views knowledge as socially constructed through interaction, dialogue, and shared experience (Vygotsky, 1978). Collaborative learning embodies this principle by placing students in roles where they must negotiate meaning, explain concepts to peers, and take joint responsibility for outcomes. In the context of SKI, this theoretical lens enables researchers to examine how historical understanding and religious values are constructed dialogically among students. Furthermore, the Independent Learning Curriculum itself is informed by constructivist principles, emphasizing learning that is active, contextualized, and student-driven (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

This study aims to explore how the Independent Learning Curriculum is implemented in SKI instruction at MTs Al-Iman Unit 2 Tulang Bawang with a specific focus on enhancing student collaboration. The research seeks to: (1) examine the strategies used by teachers to integrate collaborative learning within SKI lessons; (2) analyze student responses, engagement, and perceived benefits of collaborative activities; and (3) identify challenges and opportunities in aligning collaborative practices with the curriculum objectives. By using a qualitative case study approach, the study hopes to provide rich, contextual insights into the operationalization of KMB in Islamic education. The results are expected to inform educators, curriculum developers, and policy stakeholders on how collaborative learning can be meaningfully embedded within faith-based learning environments.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study method to explore how the Independent Learning Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) is implemented in SKI instruction, with a specific focus on collaborative learning. A qualitative design was chosen to allow for in-depth exploration of instructional practices, student responses, and teacher strategies within their natural classroom context. As Creswell and Poth (2018) explain, qualitative case studies are suitable when the researcher seeks to obtain holistic and contextual insights about a particular phenomenon within bounded settings. MTs Al-Iman Unit 2 Tulang Bawang was selected as the research site based on its active use of Kurikulum Merdeka in SKI and its adoption of collaborative learning strategies. The research subjects included one SKI teacher and twelve students from the seventh grade, selected purposively to ensure that participants had firsthand experience in collaborative classroom activities.

Data collection was carried out through three primary techniques: (1) classroom observation, focusing on teaching-learning interactions, group dynamics, and student engagement; (2) semi-structured interviews with the SKI teacher and selected students to capture their perceptions and experiences; and (3) document analysis, which included lesson plans (RPP), teaching materials, and assessment rubrics. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns related to collaborative implementation, student motivation, and instructional design. To ensure credibility, data triangulation was used by cross-verifying findings from multiple

sources and methods. Ethical procedures were observed, including informed consent and the assurance of confidentiality for all participants involved.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study reveal five dominant themes that characterize the implementation of collaborative learning in Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam (SKI) classes at MTs Al-Iman Unit 2 Tulang Bawang under the Independent Learning Curriculum. These themes emerged consistently across classroom observations, student interviews, and document analysis, reflecting both instructional intentions and actual classroom practices.

1. Active Student Participation (25%)

    One of the most observable outcomes of collaborative learning in SKI was increased student participation. Students actively engaged in discussions, asked questions, responded to peer opinions, and demonstrated enthusiasm during group activities. This aligns with the principles of Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasize learner agency and self-directed inquiry. Teachers noted that even typically quiet students became more involved when assigned specific roles in group tasks.

2. Teacher as Facilitator (20%)
3. The role of the teacher shifted from traditional lecturer to learning facilitator. The SKI teacher guided student inquiry, clarified misconceptions during group discussions, and supported group dynamics without dominating the learning space. This role transformation reflects the pedagogical shift encouraged by Vygotskian principles and Kurikulum Merdeka, which prioritize scaffolding and student autonomy.

4. Use of Group-Based Tasks (22%)

    Collaborative tasks such as timeline construction, role-playing Islamic figures, and poster presentations were frequently used. Students reported that these activities made historical content more relatable and encouraged mutual accountability. Lesson plans (RPP) analyzed also indicated the intentional integration of project-based learning elements aligned with the Profil Pelajar Pancasila.

5. Peer Feedback Practices (18%)

    Students were encouraged to give and receive feedback during group reflections and post-presentation sessions. Teachers created rubrics to guide constructive peer responses. This process helped build communication and critical thinking skills, though some students noted discomfort in criticizing friends, indicating a need for further training in giving effective peer feedback.

6. Collaborative Project Outcomes (15%)

    Final products—such as historical drama scripts and timeline posters—served as evidence of collaborative effort and learning synthesis. Student reflections and teacher interviews confirmed that these outcomes improved content retention and strengthened team cohesion. While challenges like unequal participation existed, most groups succeeded in completing their tasks with shared responsibility.
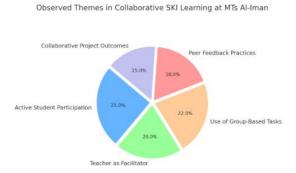
Figure: Observed Themes in Collaborative SKI Learning at MTs Al-Iman

The pie chart illustrates the proportional prominence of each identified theme during the study. Active student participation was the most frequently observed, followed by structured group tasks and teacher facilitation. Peer feedback and project outcomes, while slightly less frequent, were integral to the overall learning experience.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of collaborative learning in SKI instruction at MTs Al-Iman Unit 2 Tulang Bawang reflects a significant alignment with the pedagogical vision of the Independent Learning Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka). The dominant theme of active student participation, as revealed in this study, confirms the theoretical assertion by Vygotsky (1978) that social interaction is a primary driver of cognitive development. Students' involvement in discussions, problem-solving, and task negotiation supports the idea that knowledge is co-constructed in a social context. The observation that even passive students became more active during group work highlights the empowering potential of collaboration in promoting equitable classroom engagement.

The teacher's transformation into a facilitator, rather than a content transmitter, aligns with the constructivist orientation of the curriculum, which encourages learner autonomy and inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This shift requires teachers to scaffold learning by providing guidance, asking open-ended questions, and creating space for student-led exploration. Johnson and Johnson (2014) emphasize that the teacher's role in managing group processes and fostering positive interdependence is crucial to the success of collaborative learning—an element that was clearly evident in the SKI classes observed.

The use of group-based tasks, such as dramatizations and visual projects, not only made SKI content more tangible but also supported the development of competencies outlined in the Profil Pelajar Pancasila, including critical thinking, creativity, and mutual cooperation (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). These activities encouraged students to synthesize historical narratives and reflect on their moral relevance, echoing findings by Huda et al. (2017), who advocate for integrating Islamic values through interactive strategies. The collaborative nature of SKI instruction allowed for deeper student engagement and greater ownership of learning outcomes.

While peer feedback practices were successfully implemented, the hesitance of some students to critique their peers points to an important pedagogical challenge. Giving and receiving feedback requires emotional intelligence and trust, which may not be fully developed in early adolescents. As suggested by Trilling and Fadel (2009),

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collaborative skills must be explicitly taught and rehearsed, not merely assumed. Developing effective peer evaluation norms could enhance students' meta-cognitive abilities and support the internalization of learning goals.

The presence of tangible project outcomes serves as both motivation and assessment in collaborative learning. Final artifacts such as posters and dramatized scripts functioned as authentic evidence of understanding and teamwork. These results support Wahyuni's (2022) conclusion that collaborative learning contributes to students' character formation, social responsibility, and academic confidence. However, the issue of uneven participation within groups—where some students take on more workload than others—remains a challenge and reflects the need for refined group role management and individual accountability.

In sum, the study confirms that SKI, as a subject deeply rooted in historical narratives and moral teachings, is well-suited for collaborative learning under the Independent Learning Curriculum. It enables students to engage with Islamic content not just cognitively, but socially and affectively. However, for optimal implementation, continued teacher training, rubric-based evaluation, and school-level support are essential. This case study offers a promising example of how religious education can embrace progressive pedagogy without losing its normative foundations.

CONCLUSSION

The integration of collaborative learning strategies within SKI instruction at MTs Al-Iman Unit 2 Tulang Bawang under the Independent Learning Curriculum has demonstrated significant pedagogical and developmental benefits. The study revealed that student participation increased substantially through the use of group-based tasks, guided peer interactions, and collaborative projects. These practices aligned with the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka, especially in realizing the Profil Pelajar Pancasila attributes of cooperation, critical thinking, and independent learning.

The transformation of the teacher's role into a facilitator and learning partner supported a classroom environment in which students were encouraged to take ownership of their learning. This dynamic aligns with socio-constructivist theory, highlighting the importance of interaction and shared responsibility in knowledge construction. Moreover, the implementation of authentic assessments through project outcomes and peer feedback mechanisms enriched the learning experience and offered meaningful opportunities for reflection and growth.

However, the study also highlighted several challenges, including unequal participation in group activities and limited readiness among students to provide constructive peer feedback. These issues point to the need for more structured collaborative training, clearer role assignments, and consistent use of rubrics to guide both process and product evaluation.

In conclusion, the study supports the viability and value of applying collaborative learning within Islamic religious education, particularly in SKI subjects. It recommends that schools adopting the Independent Learning Curriculum provide ongoing professional development for teachers and establish institutional support systems that promote effective and sustainable collaborative practices. Future research could explore longitudinal impacts of such approaches on student character development, religious understanding, and academic achievement.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Kibtiyah was responsible for conceptualizing the study, conducting classroom observations, and drafting the methodology and findings. Miswanto contributed to data analysis, literature synthesis, and the development of the discussion and conclusion sections. Sri supported interview transcription, document analysis, and final editing of the manuscript. All authors jointly reviewed and approved the final version of the article for publication.

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