

OPTIMISING STUDENT INTEREST AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INTRACURRICULAR LEARNING OPTIONS AND THEMATIC PROJECTS IN THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the optimisation of student interest and talent development through the selection of intraschool learning and thematic projects in the Merdeka Curriculum. The method used is a literature review, analysing various scientific references, books, policy documents, and research findings related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in schools. The Merdeka Curriculum provides freedom and flexibility to students to choose subjects, learning pathways, and involvement in thematic projects based on the Pancasila Student Profile, thereby facilitating the strengthening of students' interests and talents individually. Through a combination of adaptive intraschool learning and thematic projects based on collaboration and creativity, the development of students' potential is expected to be optimal. However, implementation in the field still faces challenges in terms of teacher readiness, facilities, assessment, and parent participation. This study highlights the importance of synergy among stakeholders as well as policy innovation and teacher training to ensure the success of interest and talent development in a dynamic, adaptive, and child-centred educational ecosystem.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, interests and talents, intraschool learning, thematic projects, optimisation of student potential.

Introduction

Education in Indonesia currently faces significant challenges in shaping students who are not only academically excellent but also capable of developing their full potential, including their interests and talents. The era of globalisation and technological advancement demands human resources who are adaptive, creative, and unique in various fields. In this context, the development of students' interests and talents is crucial to preparing a generation that is ready to compete at the national and global levels (Judijanto & Aslan, 2025); (Purike & Aslan, 2025).

Interest and talent are a combination of internal potential that can lead individuals to achieve success in a particular field. Interest serves as a motivator, while talent forms the foundation of natural ability that needs to be cultivated and directed. The interdependence between the two is a crucial foundation for achieving student

performance. Without optimal development, talent may remain untapped, while interest not supported by talent tends to struggle to yield tangible achievements (Komari & Aslan, 2025).

At the educational institution level, efforts to develop interests and talents still face challenges. One common phenomenon is "wrong major selection" due to students' lack of understanding of their own potential. Many students choose their field of study solely because they follow their friends or trends without careful consideration of their interests and talents. This has implications for their motivation to learn, their achievements, and even their future education and career (Hermawan, 2021).

The role of schools in identifying and developing students' interests and talents is crucial. Schools must provide a conducive learning environment, diverse extracurricular activities, and supportive facilities to enable students to express themselves in line with their potential. Teachers function as facilitators, not merely instructors, guiding students to recognise and develop their uniqueness through creative approaches and liberating the learning process (Hikmawati, 2022).

Collaboration between teachers, parents, and the surrounding environment is essential for optimising the development of interests and talents. The lack of parental involvement, especially in recognising children's talents, often becomes a barrier. Therefore, good synergy will have a positive impact on students' achievements, both in academic and non-academic fields (Fitriani et al., 2024); (Hapinas et al., 2025).

The paradigm shift in education in Indonesia is marked by the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum provides students with ample space to determine their learning paths, whether through intraschool learning or thematic projects based on the Pancasila learner profile. This innovation places students as active subjects in the development of their interests and talents (Aminullah & Dewi, 2024).

Intracurricular learning is designed to ensure that students acquire essential knowledge according to their needs, interests, and learning pace. The mechanism for selecting subjects, developing thematic projects, and flexible learning hours provide students with opportunities for broader exploration. This freedom of choice is expected to produce a generation of independent and innovative lifelong learners (Utami, 2022).

Strengthening interests and talents through thematic projects provides real-life experiences while deepening understanding of concepts relevant to life. Students learn to collaborate, solve problems, and apply cross-disciplinary skills, so that the development process is not only cognitive but also affective and psychomotor. However, optimising the development of interests and talents is not without challenges. Some obstacles include limited facilities and infrastructure in schools, uneven teacher training on differentiated learning management, and an educational culture that still emphasises academic achievement alone (Hodijah & Nugraha, 2025).

Efforts to identify students' interests and talents require structured and continuous assessment. Instruments such as psychometric tests, portfolios, and behavioural observations are important tools for mapping students' potential. This process is important to avoid misguided guidance or development that is not in line with each individual's uniqueness (Indarta et al., 2022).

The importance of optimising the development of interests and talents is also closely related to the national education goal of shaping Indonesians who are faithful, knowledgeable, skilled, creative, independent, and responsible. Education is not only for academic skills, but also for preparing students to make ethical and strategic choices in society (Ali, 2024).

Facing a future filled with change and uncertainty, education that accommodates diverse interests and talents is an absolute necessity. The Merdeka Curriculum, with all its innovations, is seen as a strategic momentum in creating a more humanistic education system that prioritises the potential of every child. With the right policies, competent educators, and the participation of all stakeholders, it is hoped that all students will be able to develop their interests and talents optimally. Ultimately, education in Indonesia will be able to produce productive, creative, and globally competitive generations without losing their national character.

Research Method

This study employs a literature review method (library research) conducted by tracing, collecting, reading, recording, and analysing various relevant literature sources, such as scientific journals, books, official policy documents, and articles discussing the development of students' interests and talents in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum (Eliyah & Aslan, 2025). All data and information were systematically reviewed to obtain theoretical and empirical understanding, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of the optimisation of interest and talent development through the selection of intraschool learning and thematic projects. The results of this literature review are expected to provide a strong scientific foundation and evidence-based educational recommendations based on available findings (Bolderston, 2008).

Results and Discussion

Learning Models in the Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum marks a paradigm shift in educational practices in Indonesia by emphasising active student involvement in the learning process and adapting materials to individual needs and potential. The learning model developed is based on the principles of freedom, flexibility, and relevance to the real world so that students can develop optimally (Borzoei, 2023).

Basically, there are two main pillars in the Merdeka Curriculum learning model, namely intracurricular learning and thematic projects. Both are designed to meet the

needs of students in achieving basic competencies while developing their interests, talents, and character through meaningful learning experiences (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022).

Intracurricular learning is learning activities that are included in scheduled lessons and focus on deepening core material in accordance with learning outcomes. Teachers have the freedom to use various methods, from direct teaching, discussion, to competency mapping to support the achievement of learning objectives (Lestari, 2023).

Intracurricular implementation also emphasises the application of differentiation, which is a learning strategy tailored to students' needs and learning styles, either through individual or group assignments. Teachers act as facilitators who map the abilities and potential of each student and provide ample room for exploration.

The intraschool context is further strengthened through the integration of local content and essential subjects, such as Informatics and Vocational Studies, which are relevant to technological advancements and students' daily lives. This supports a more contextual and practical learning process. In addition, assessment in the intraschool model follows the principles of formative and summative assessment, which emphasise the learning process and outcomes. Teachers are given the freedom to determine meaningful assessment instruments to observe the overall development of students' potential (Fitri, 2023).

Another unique feature of the Merdeka Curriculum is the implementation of thematic projects based on the Pancasila Student Profile (P5). This project-based learning encourages students to engage in collaborative, exploratory, and creative activities rooted in themes of national identity, entrepreneurship, the environment, and local wisdom. Through thematic projects, students not only gain conceptual knowledge but also develop soft skills such as leadership, teamwork, creativity, and a sense of responsibility. Projects can take the form of creating works, observing the environment, or developing solutions to real-world problems around them (Jf & Latif, 2020).

The selection of the appropriate learning model is crucial for the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Some of the learning models that are widely applied include Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Problem-Based Learning, Cooperative Learning, Discovery Learning, and Think-Pair-Share. These models encourage students to be more proactive in the learning process and to collaborate with their peers (Widodo, 2020).

Project-Based Learning, for example, emphasises the process of problem-solving and the creation of tangible products as learning outcomes. Students are encouraged to design, research, and develop solutions to problems relevant to their lives and society (Firmansyah & Aslan, 2025a).

The Discovery Learning model strengthens students' critical thinking and independence by providing space for them to discover concepts, theories, or solutions to problems through observation and experimentation. The Think-Pair-Share model

focuses on developing social interaction and productive discussions among students. Teachers provide stimuli or problems, students think individually, discuss in pairs, and then share their findings in a large group. This method is very helpful in fostering self-confidence and effective communication skills (Firmansyah & Aslan, 2025b).

In its implementation in lower grades, teachers use more exploration-based and fun game approaches. In upper grades, projects and problem solving begin to dominate with challenging themes that are closer to real life. Flexibility is also reflected in the management of learning time; schools can adjust the distribution of lesson hours according to the needs and progress of students. Learning is not only conducted in the classroom but also outside the classroom, such as field trips or internships in the workplace (Nuryanto, 2023).

Supporting infrastructure such as teaching modules, multimedia teaching materials, and digital technology are vital tools in supporting the success of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers need to be creative in selecting teaching resources and tools to optimise learning. Collaboration between teachers, students, parents, and the school community is a crucial pillar in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum learning model. Innovation and adaptation are needed to ensure that every learning activity is truly relevant and meaningful for all students (Jenita et al., 2022).

Thus, the learning model in the Merdeka Curriculum is a dynamic system that emphasizes independent learning, broad knowledge, and life skills. The entire process is directed toward building a generation of adaptive, creative, and strong-charactered learners in line with the demands of the 21st century.

Optimisation of Student Interest and Talent Development

The development of students' interests and talents is an absolute requirement in modern education to prepare a generation that is ready to compete in the global era. Every student has unique potential that needs to be identified and honed as early as possible to achieve optimal development in both academic and non-academic fields. The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to address the individual needs of students by providing ample space for the development of interests and talents. Through a flexible approach, students are not merely objects of learning but active subjects empowered to shape their own learning paths according to their potential (Hayati et al., 2024).

Early identification of interests and talents is conducted through observation, assessment, and communication between teachers, students, and parents. This identification serves as the foundation for mapping potential and designing appropriate development strategies. One form of optimisation in schools is through differentiated intraschool learning (Sintya, 2024). Adaptive learning facilitates students' needs, learning styles, and interests, creating an inclusive and motivating environment for exploring their potential. Additionally, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasises strengthening through thematic projects based on the Pancasila Student Profile. This

project provides students with opportunities to be creative, collaborate, and solve real-world problems to develop their talents and character simultaneously (Aslan & Sidabutar, 2025); (Caroline & Aslan, 2025).

The development of interests and talents becomes more effective with the presence of various extracurricular programmes at school. Activities such as art, sports, science, and literacy serve as platforms for channeling potential that is not limited to the classroom. Optimisation strategies also lie in the provision of adequate facilities and infrastructure. Suitable facilities such as laboratories, art studios, sports halls, and access to technology can enhance learning experiences and accelerate the development of students' talents (Daga, 2020).

The role of teachers is vital as facilitators, mentors, and motivators. Teachers do not merely deliver content but actively guide students in exploring their interests, providing guidance, and encouraging them to try new things in line with their potential. Close collaboration between schools, teachers, parents, and the community is key. This synergy can build a support system that enriches experiences and creates a positive learning environment for the growth and development of each child's potential (Alam & Dewi, 2024).

Evaluating the development of interests and talents requires a holistic formative and summative assessment system. Assessment should not be limited to cognitive aspects but also include skills, attitudes, and creative achievements of students. Rewards, recognition, and opportunities to participate in competitions or performances can enhance students' motivation and self-confidence in pursuing their interests and talents. An environment that provides effective appreciation strengthens the process of developing children's potential (Sari & Hidayat, 2024).

The use of technology is also important as a learning medium that supports the flexible exploration of interests and talents. Digitalisation opens access to content, training, and even networks that enable students to learn independently according to their preferences. Developing interests and talents is not without challenges, such as time constraints, facilities, and the dominant academic culture. However, collective awareness and innovative strategies can be solutions to ensure optimisation continues (Sudarmo et al., 2021).

Ultimately, the optimal development of students' interests and talents can only be achieved if all parties actively and consistently participate. Education that opens opportunities, appreciates uniqueness, and supports the growth of every student is the foundation for the emergence of outstanding, creative, and future-ready generations.

Challenges and Solutions in Implementation

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in developing students' interests and talents faces various complex challenges at the school level. One of the main challenges is the readiness of human resources, particularly teachers, as the main pillar

of the successful implementation of this curriculum. Many teachers still do not fully understand the essence of differentiated learning and thematic project-based methods in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum (Puspitasari & Aslan, 2024) . In addition, limited training and professional development for teachers pose a separate challenge. Teachers often face difficulties in adapting to the more flexible and technology-based curriculum transformation. The lack of training and knowledge about the use of digital devices makes the learning process not yet optimal (Akmaluddin et al., 2025) .

In terms of facilities and infrastructure, many schools still lack supporting facilities for developing interests and talents. Facilities such as laboratories, art studios, sports halls, and access to digital technology are not yet available evenly across all Indonesian schools. In addition to internal school factors, students also face challenges in the form of limited access to technology and the internet, especially in remote areas. This disparity makes opportunities for exploring talents and developing interests through online learning or extracurricular activities very limited (Alam & Dewi, 2024) .

Collaboration between teachers, schools, and parents is also not yet optimal. Low parental involvement in monitoring and supporting children's potential exploration is still prevalent. However, close collaboration is crucial in the process of mapping and developing students' interests and talents.

In terms of time management, the integration of intraschool learning and thematic projects often conflicts with the school's busy schedule or agenda. This makes the implementation of thematic projects under the Pancasila Student Profile less smooth in some schools. Resistance to change from some teachers is also a common obstacle. Some teachers feel uncomfortable when they have to apply innovative project-based learning approaches or differentiated instruction () (Yuliza, 2022) .

Learning evaluation is another challenge. Competency assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum requires a combination of in-depth formative and summative assessments so that the determination of students' interest and talent development is more valid. However, not all teachers are able to design and implement holistic assessments according to student needs (Indayanti et al., 2022) .

From a policy perspective, funding and regulatory support are also critical issues. Some schools face difficulties in accessing funding for interest and talent development, resulting in a number of thematic projects or innovative learning programmes not being implemented to their full potential. The school culture, which still tends to be academic and focuses on cognitive achievements, often leads to the development of interests and talents in non-academic fields being neglected (Abdullah & Sahid, 2023) .

Regarding student motivation, low learning interest and active participation also hinder the implementation of thematic projects and extracurricular activities. Students need stimuli and a supportive environment to spark their enthusiasm for exploring their

potential. High administrative burdens, such as record-keeping, reporting, and assessment implementation, also consume teachers' time and energy, often hindering creativity and innovation in teaching. The diversity of students' capacities in receiving differentiated learning materials requires teachers to recognise and adjust their mentoring models according to individual student needs. This issue becomes complicated in large classes with a high number of students (Syarifah, 2023).

The key solution to address these challenges is to strengthen teachers' capacity through training, socialisation, technical guidance, and sharing sessions among educators. The preparation of infrastructure, funding, and digital devices must be prioritised to ensure that the learning process runs effectively and inclusively. Additionally, active collaboration strategies among stakeholders must be intensified. Schools, parents, and the community need to build communication and shared roles so that the learning environment truly supports the optimisation of students' interests and talents (Harahap, 2020).

Practical approaches to addressing resource shortages can be implemented by utilising local resources, simple tools, or equipment available around the school or home. Teachers' innovations in using simple tools as practical media have proven effective in overcoming the lack of specialised infrastructure (Muchlip, 2023).

Through continuous evaluation, collective reflection, and the adoption of best practices from other schools, it is hoped that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in developing students' interests and talents can be optimised and sustained.

Conclusion

Optimising the development of students' interests and talents through intraschool learning choices and thematic projects in the Merdeka Curriculum offers a new paradigm of education that is more inclusive and oriented towards the needs of each individual. The Merdeka Curriculum provides space and flexibility for students to explore their potential through a variety of learning experiences that not only emphasise academic aspects but also strengthen soft skills, creativity, and character. With this approach, every student is encouraged to understand and develop their interests or talents optimally according to their respective paths.

The success of student potential development depends heavily on the integration of various important elements, such as teacher involvement as facilitators, active parent participation, the utilisation of facilities and infrastructure, and the implementation of comprehensive assessments. Effective intraschool learning maps interests and talents through differentiated learning, while thematic projects provide real-life experiences that enrich students' social, emotional, and cognitive abilities. A conducive learning environment and collaboration among all parties are key to building an adaptive and applicable educational ecosystem.

Despite ongoing challenges and obstacles, policy innovations, strengthening educators' competencies, and a commitment to improving educational quality will reinforce efforts to optimise the development of interests and talents in schools. The Merdeka Curriculum serves as a crucial starting point for the emergence of outstanding, creative, and highly competitive human resources ready to face the changes and dynamics of life in the future.

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