

Research Article

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Transforming Music Education: Evaluating the Impact of the Merdeka Curriculum in Arts Education

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Abstract

Background/purpose. This study evaluates the implementation and impact of the Merdeka Curriculum in music education at SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang, focusing on fostering creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration through a flexible and experiential approach. The curriculum faces challenges, including limited teacher training and inadequate resources, which may hinder its full potential.

Materials/methods. A qualitative approach was employed, involving 32 seventh-grade students. Data collection included observations, interviews, documentation, and literature reviews. The curriculum's effectiveness was evaluated through the five learning syntax elements: Experiencing, Reflecting, Thinking and Working Artistically, Creating, and Impacting, using mixed methods to assess students' performance and the implementation process.

Results. The findings show an average score of 89.80, categorized as "Independent Change." The highest achievement was observed in the Creating element (90%), demonstrating students' creativity in composing ensemble music. Other elements, such as Experiencing (85%) and Thinking and Working Artistically (87%), also showed strong outcomes, reflecting the curriculum's success in engaging students and enhancing their musical development.

Conclusion. The Merdeka Curriculum effectively promotes creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration in music education. However, to optimize its impact, it is essential to address challenges such as teacher training, resource availability, and time constraints. These insights provide valuable guidance for enhancing arts education and curriculum reform in Indonesia.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Curriculum Changes

Indonesia's education system has a longstanding tradition of periodically updating its curricula to reflect changing societal and global needs. Historical shifts in curriculum development—from the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) to the 2013 Curriculum (K-13)—have been aimed at enhancing the quality of education, ensuring that students are equipped with the necessary skills to thrive in a rapidly evolving world (Priawasana & Subiyantoro, 2024). However, these previous curricula were often criticized for being rigid, overly standardized, and not fully accommodating the diverse needs and learning styles of students across Indonesia (Fadillah et al., 2024; Novaliendry et al., 2023).

In response to these criticisms and to address the demands of a more dynamic educational environment, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced the Merdeka Curriculum (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024). This new curriculum strongly emphasizes flexibility, student-centered learning, and the development of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (Ridhani et al., 2024; Novaliendry et al., 2023). The goal is to provide students with a more holistic, balanced education that not only covers academic knowledge but also fosters emotional intelligence, character development, and social responsibility (Nuraeni et al., 2020).

One of the notable features of the Merdeka Curriculum is its focus on providing schools with greater autonomy in shaping the learning experience, allowing them to adapt their teaching methods and materials to the unique needs of their students and communities (Pasaribu, 2023; Rosanawati et al., 2025). This flexibility is seen as crucial in promoting a more personalized and inclusive approach to education, particularly in subjects like the arts, where creativity and individual expression are central to the learning process (Fadillah et al., 2023; Perry & Edwards, 2019).

Music education, in particular, stands to benefit from the Merdeka Curriculum, as it encourages more hands-on, experiential learning and supports the development of students' artistic and creative abilities (Mattar, 2018; Rochovská et al., 2023). However, implementing this curriculum presents various challenges, particularly in ensuring that educators are adequately trained and that resources are available to support the effective delivery of arts education (Andaryani et al., 2024; Farell et al., 2021). Additionally, schools must navigate the balance between maintaining traditional music education practices while embracing new methodologies that align with the Merdeka Curriculum's principles.

This study seeks to evaluate the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on music education in Indonesia, specifically in the context of SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang. The location of this school was chosen due to its unique position in the educational landscape of Padangpanjang, which is known for its strong cultural and artistic heritage. The school has been actively involved in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and serves as a case study for understanding the successes and challenges faced by educators in adapting music education to this new framework (Tresna Yunita et al., 2023).

By examining the implementation process, identifying key challenges, and exploring the impact on students' musical development, this study aims to provide valuable insights into how the Merdeka Curriculum can transform music education in Indonesia (Setyaningsih et al., 2023). The findings will not only contribute to the broader discourse on curriculum reform but also offer practical recommendations for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to enhance the quality and accessibility of music education in schools across the country.

1.2. Significance of Merdeka Curriculum in Arts Education

The Merdeka Curriculum in arts education plays a crucial role in fostering holistic development and preparing students for the 21st century. Research has shown that music education, in particular, promotes cognitive, emotional, and social growth (Schneider & Rohmann, 2021). These benefits are especially relevant in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning, autonomy, and flexibility (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024).

The Merdeka Curriculum's flexible approach to education allows schools to tailor content to the diverse needs of their students, making arts education more inclusive and relevant (Budiman et al., 2020). In the realm of music education, this flexibility enables a more personalized and creative teaching approach, encouraging students to explore their interests, develop their talents, and engage in meaningful learning experiences (Daud et al., 2024; Rochovská et al., 2023).

Moreover, the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on project-based learning and interdisciplinary connections provides students with opportunities to apply their music knowledge in real-world contexts, thereby enhancing the relevance and impact of their learning (Wang et al., 2024). This shift towards a more holistic and flexible approach is particularly beneficial in a rapidly changing world, where innovation and adaptability are key (Reza et al., 2023).

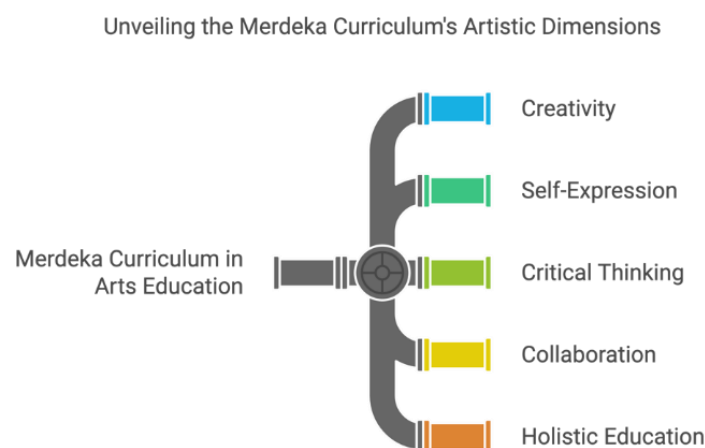


Figure 1. Merdeka Curriculum in Arts Education

Given the significance of music in shaping well-rounded individuals, the Merdeka Curriculum presents a unique opportunity to reform and revitalize arts education (Rosanawati et al., 2025). By fostering an environment that prioritizes creativity, collaboration, and personal growth, the curriculum aims to not only enhance students' technical abilities but also to enrich their emotional and social intelligence (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022).

As such, understanding the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on music education is crucial to evaluating its effectiveness and determining how it can be improved to better meet the needs of students and the demands of the broader society (Haerani et al., 2020). This research can provide valuable insights into the role of arts education in holistic development and the potential of flexible, student-centered curricula to transform the educational landscape (Erim et al., 2015).

1.3. Research Focus

This study explores the practical application of the Merdeka Curriculum within arts education, focusing on music instruction at SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang. Utilizing a qualitative approach, data were gathered through observations, interviews, and documentation to gain an in-depth

understanding of the curriculum's implementation in music classes. The primary concentration of this research is on grade VII music learning, particularly in Phase D, which emphasizes five key elements: Experiencing, Reflecting, Thinking and Working Artistically, Making/Creating, and Impacting, all facilitated through customized teaching modules. This approach aims to capture a thorough depiction of the curriculum's application in an arts education context and assess how these learning components influence student learning outcomes (Ristek, 2021). Furthermore, this research aims to identify the challenges faced by educators and the strategies employed to address these challenges, providing a comprehensive view of curriculum adaptation in a real-world educational setting.

This study addresses a gap in existing research, as the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in arts education especially in music has not been widely examined. While previous studies (Fauzan et al., 2023; Riyadi & Budiman, 2023) have touched on how this curriculum fosters creativity and engagement, little research has focused on its application within secondary school music classes. This study contributes new insights into how music educators at SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang tailor the curriculum to establish an effective learning environment, adding valuable information to the body of work on curriculum innovation in arts education. These findings provide significant perspectives for educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in advancing arts education in Indonesia (Haerani et al., 2020).

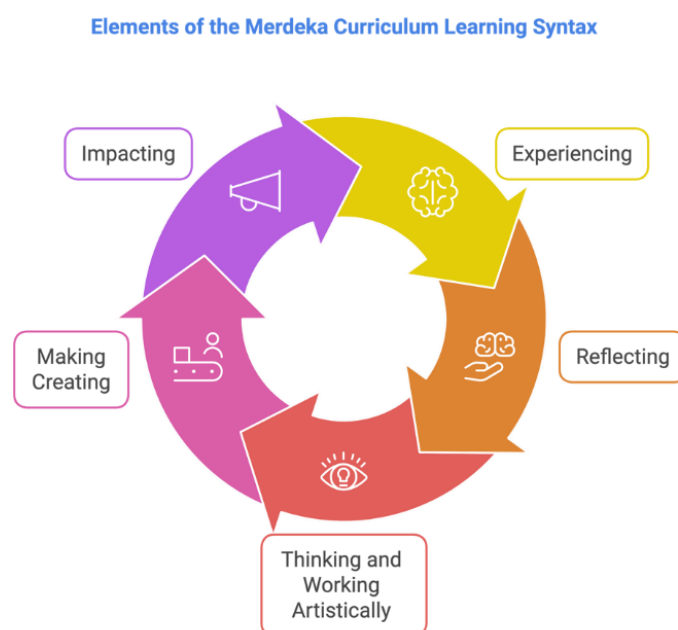


Figure 2. Elements of the Merdeka Curriculum Learning Syntax

Each supporting element plays a specific and complementary role in fostering meaningful learning experiences. The Experiencing phase emphasizes learning through direct experience, such as exploration, observation, or practical activities. Following this, the Reflecting phase encourages learners to critically evaluate and internalize their experiences to gain deeper insights. The Thinking and Working Artistically phase promotes creativity and innovation, allowing students to express their ideas uniquely and imaginatively. In the Making Creating phase, learners apply their knowledge to produce tangible outcomes, such as projects or solutions. Finally, the Impacting phase focuses on the real-world application of learning, where students' contributions positively influence their surroundings and communities.

This diagram reflects the Merdeka Curriculum's philosophy, which prioritizes active, meaningful, and impactful learning. The interconnected nature of the elements indicates a continuous learning

cycle, integrating experiential learning, critical reflection, and creative expression. This approach aims to evaluate well-rounded individuals who are reflective, innovative, and capable of making significant contributions to society, aligning with the curriculum's holistic educational goals.

The findings from this study are anticipated to deepen the understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in Indonesia, specifically in music education. They may serve as a foundation for future educational policy and inspire curriculum development that aligns more closely with the evolving needs of students in today's world. Additionally, this study is expected to yield practical recommendations to enhance arts education quality in schools, aiming to create a more comprehensive and engaging learning experience for students.

2. Method

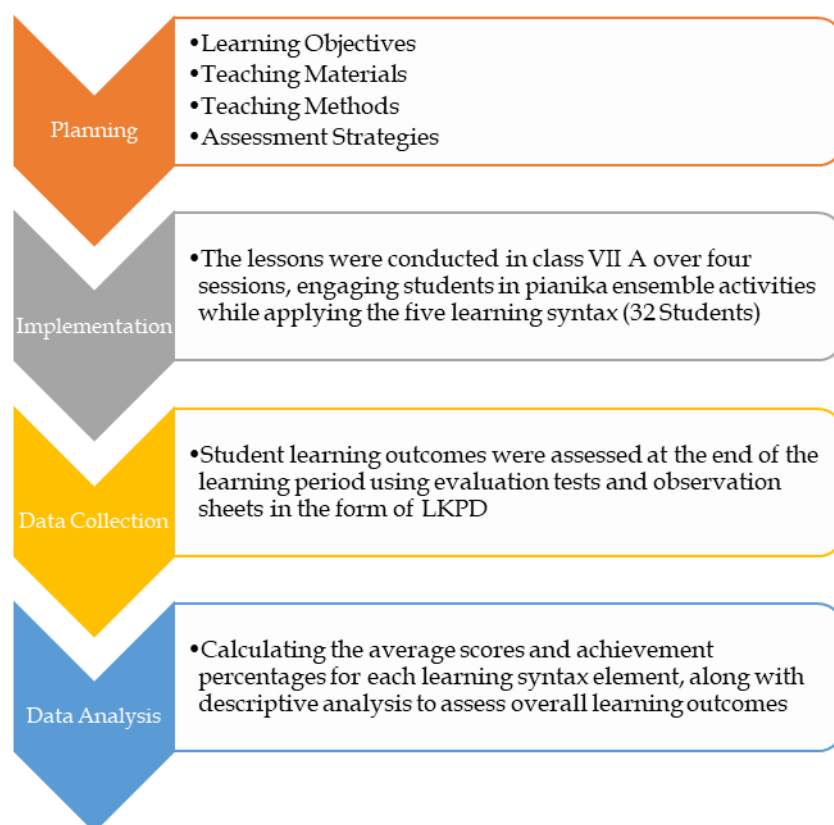


Figure 3. Research Procedure

This study aims to evaluate the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the Arts and Culture subject at SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang, specifically focusing on the topic "Playing Ensemble Music using Pianika." A descriptive qualitative method was employed to provide an in-depth understanding of the curriculum's application and the learning outcomes achieved by students. The study population consisted of all seventh-grade students, with a purposive sample of 32 students actively participating in the pianika ensemble lessons. This sampling technique ensured that the study included students with direct experience in ensemble music, enhancing the relevance of the findings to curriculum implementation in arts education.

Three primary instruments were used in this study: learning evaluation tests, observation sheets, and ensemble performance assessments. The learning evaluation tests assessed students' achievements across the five phases of the Merdeka Curriculum: Experiencing, Reflecting, Thinking and Working Artistically, Creating, and Impacting. These tests included multiple-choice, essay, and practical tasks presented in student worksheets (LKPD). Observation sheets documented the learning process, focusing on teacher-student interactions and instructional methods, while the ensemble

performance assessments allowed students to demonstrate their practical music skills with the pianika, providing experiential insights into the effectiveness of ensemble learning activities.

The timeline for this study was set over four class sessions, with lesson plans developed to incorporate the five phases of the Merdeka Curriculum. These plans guided the ensemble learning activities across the specified period, allowing for a structured and focused evaluation. Data collection procedures involved lesson planning, implementation, data collection, and data analysis. Descriptive quantitative analysis was used to calculate the average scores and achievement percentages for each curriculum phase, while qualitative analysis examined observational data to provide a more nuanced understanding of student experiences and instructional effectiveness.

Instrument validity was verified by arts education experts, and reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure consistency (Sugiyono, 2016). Although the study is limited by sample size and potential observational bias, it contributes valuable insights into the practical application of the Merdeka Curriculum in arts education, particularly in ensemble music learning. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and data confidentiality, were strictly adhered to throughout the study (Andaryani et al., 2024; Tresna Yunita et al., 2023).

3. Results

3.1. Results of Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Music Learning

Table 1. Average Achievement of Each Learning Syntax Element

No	Learning Syntax Element	Average Achievement (%)
1	Experiencing	85
2	Reflecting	82
3	Thinking and Working Artistically	87
4	Making Creating	90
5	Impacting	84

This study shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Music Arts learning at SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang has yielded positive results, particularly in the topic "Playing Ensemble Music using the Pianika." Based on the five syntax elements of the Merdeka Curriculum Experiencing, Reflecting, Thinking and Working Artistically, Creating, and Impacting students demonstrated active engagement and significant progress in their musical skills. Evaluation results indicate an average score of 90, categorized as "Independent Change." This achievement reflects the success of creating a learning environment that fosters creativity and collaborative skills among students, aligning with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

In the "Creating" element, students exhibited a high level of skill in creatively composing ensemble music. Their active participation in this phase aligns with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes creativity and experiential learning. The significant improvement in this area supports previous studies, such as those by (Nurgiyantoro, 2014) and (Prasetyo, T. and Zainuddin, 2022), which indicate that activity-based learning methods enhance students' creativity and critical thinking skills. This finding is also consistent with (Daniel, 2020) view that modern curricula must be flexible and support holistic learning needs, with the arts playing a crucial role in students' personal development.

Furthermore, the achievement table shows that in the “Experiencing” element, students scored 85%, indicating a strong understanding of basic musical concepts through direct experience. The “Reflecting” element reached a score of 82%, which shows students’ ability to reflect on and evaluate their learning experiences. Meanwhile, the “Thinking and Working Artistically” element achieved 87%, suggesting that students were able to develop critical and artistic thinking skills relevant to ensemble music activities. The high percentages in these elements indicate that a practical approach in arts learning effectively enhances student engagement and comprehension.

The “Creating” element achieved the highest score at 90%, indicating students’ creativity and innovation in composing music. Finally, the “Impacting” element scored 84%, reflecting students’ ability to effectively present their work to an audience. Overall, the achievements in these five elements show that the Merdeka Curriculum effectively supports the development of essential aspects in music arts, from direct experience to creation and presentation. This success demonstrates that this curriculum approach provides a more holistic, creative, and collaborative learning experience for students in the arts context.

SMP Negeri 1 Padang Panjang promotes Mandiri Berubah as a school achievement target for change for the better. The Merdeka Mengajar (PMM) platform, a digital resource that provides reference learning materials, allows teachers to improve their understanding of learning materials by holding workshops and sharing knowledge with fellow teachers. The implementation of Merdeka curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang based on the results of interviews with the VII grade music teacher of SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang that:

Optimizing the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum independently can be done by always participating in self-education training through learning videos, understanding material and tests to show actual performance in completing one self-training topic. This allows teachers to better understand the application of the Merdeka Curriculum independently in educational activities, including Cultural Arts Education (Music Teacher).

3.2. Distribution of Average Scores

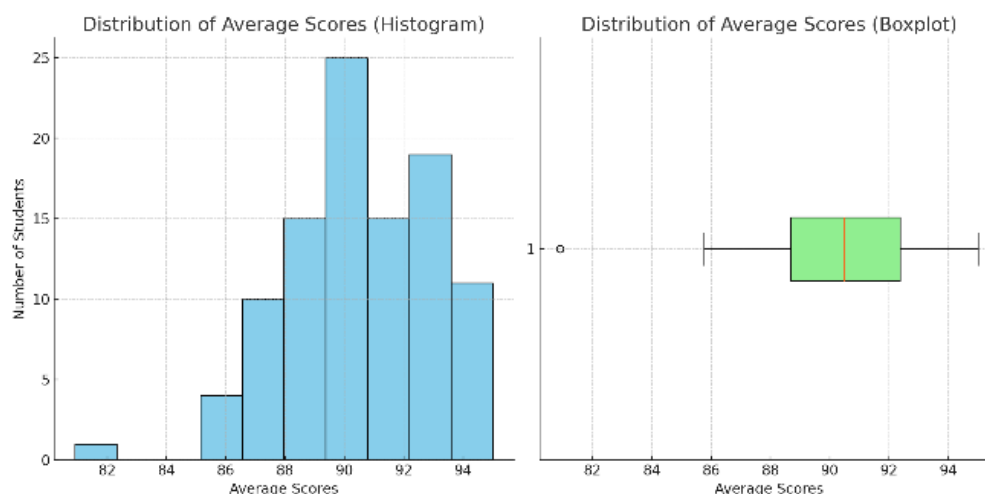


Figure 4. Distribution of Scores

The average score distribution of the 32 learners showed a high concentration of scores between 85 and 95, indicating that most students achieved good scores. This reflects the effectiveness of the applied learning process, where most students are able to master the material well and achieve the set standards. With such a high concentration of grades, it can be concluded that the quality of teaching and the curriculum implemented positively impacted students' academic achievement. It also indicates consistency in the understanding and application of the material, as well as strong motivation from students to achieve optimal results.

The problems faced by teachers during learning are limited in how to motivate students to actively learn and adapt to the scheduled time. Based on the results of interviews with Cultural Arts teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang who explained that:

Learning Outcomes (CP) have the same core as the Graduate Competency Standards (SKL) but CP leads to the condition of the child. Teachers cannot force students to be able to complete a certain material (Cultural Arts Teacher).

3.3. Linking to the Merdeka Curriculum

Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes flexible, creativity-based and experiential learning, especially in art and music subjects. With this approach, students are given the freedom to develop their interests and talents in the arts, without being restricted by overly rigid structures. Experiential learning allows students to be more directly involved in the creative process, which encourages the development of practical skills and deeper understanding. This is particularly relevant in the context of art and music education, where exploration and innovation are important aspects of learning.

In its implementation, Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for students to choose and explore art or music forms that interest them, as well as customize the learning process according to their individual abilities and pace. This approach not only increases student engagement, but also supports the development of creative and critical skills that are indispensable in the arts. Thus, Merdeka Curriculum can improve the quality of art and music learning by emphasizing flexibility and creative freedom, which in turn can result in better achievement, as reflected in the distribution of grades which shows a high concentration of good grades.

Another obstacle found is that teachers have difficulty applying P5 when learning music. Teachers must be creative in adjusting music learning to achieve CP. Further interviews with Cultural Arts teachers stated that:

A specific barrier in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in music learning is the teacher's background. Since grade VII, students should have been grouped by type. If students want to focus on music, then there must be one teacher who is the supervisor. The same applies to dance, fine arts and other branches of cultural arts (Cultural Arts Teacher).

Based on the needs, art lessons should also be expanded outside of class hours because both teachers and students cannot discuss the learning received, each level has a different learning focus. Another obstacle in maximizing learning is the limited supply of facilities and the facilities that previously existed in schools have been damaged. Despite its shortcomings, Merdeka Curriculum has positive values. The Cultural Arts subject teacher stated that:

The independent curriculum has goals that are more developed and better than the previous curriculum. And if all the supporting factors in implementing the curriculum can be completed, then learning can achieve much more satisfying results (Cultural Arts Teacher).

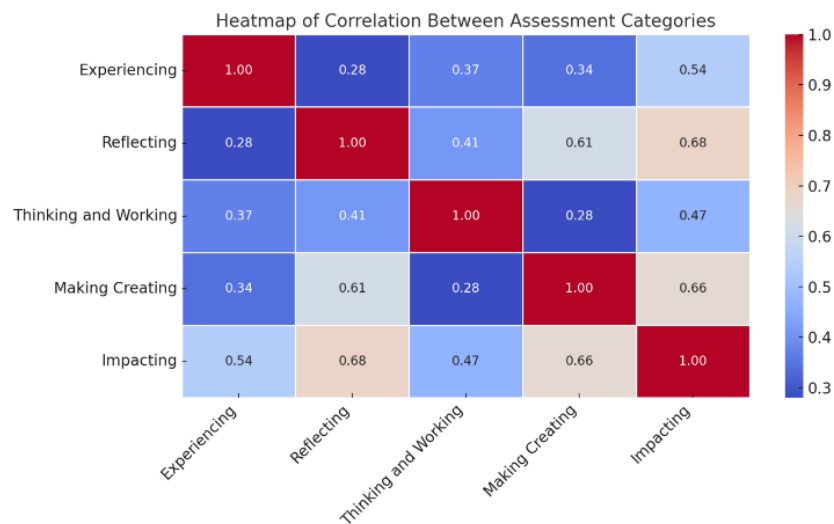


Figure 5. Heatmap of Correlation

3.4. The Role of Merdeka Curriculum in Art and Music

The Merdeka Curriculum allows for a more personalized and interest-based approach, enabling students to engage in various forms of arts and music. Students who demonstrate higher performance are given opportunities to further develop their skills and deepen their understanding, encouraging them to explore more advanced aspects of the subjects. This flexibility supports a tailored learning experience that adapts to each student's unique abilities and interests, fostering greater motivation and engagement.

Students with higher scores in the "Reflecting" category demonstrate the ability to think critically and reflect on their artwork in a profound manner. This ability to engage deeply with their creations not only enhances their artistic development but also fosters problem-solving skills, enabling them to approach challenges with a creative mindset. The emphasis on reflection in the Merdeka Curriculum encourages students to assess and improve their work continually, promoting a deeper understanding of the creative process.

This high level of learning also reflects the effectiveness of the teaching methods used in the Merdeka Phase D curriculum. The learners have successfully developed the skills to play Pianika ensemble instruments, understand the concept of music as a whole, and are able to participate actively and creatively in musical activities.

In the context of the learning objectives, this achievement shows that learners have successfully achieved the learning objectives set out in the Merdeka Phase D curriculum in music subjects with the theme "Playing Pianika Ensemble Instruments". The learners were able to develop the ability to play musical instruments well, understand the concept of ensemble music, and work well together in the context of ensemble music.

Thus, this analysis shows that learners have achieved a high level of learning in the musical art subject "Learning to Play Pianika Ensemble Instruments". The learners have successfully mastered the learning materials, developed skills in playing musical instruments, and achieved the learning objectives set by the Merdeka Phase D Curriculum at the Junior High School level.

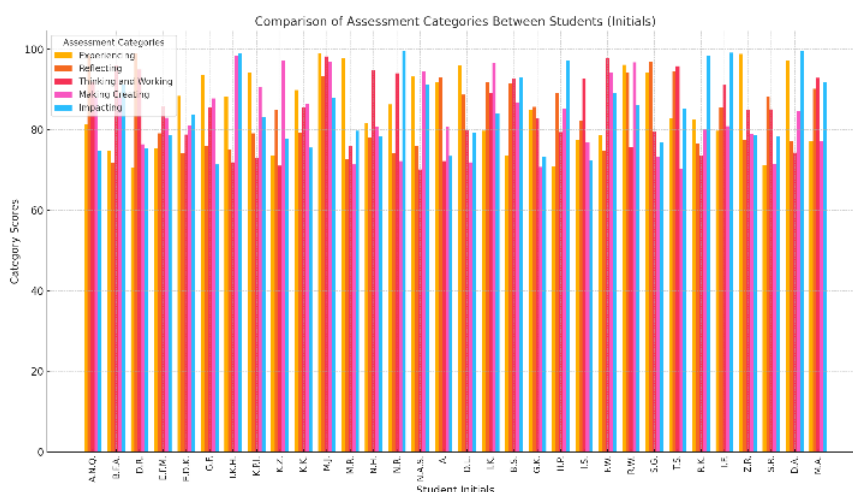


Figure 6. Comparison of Assessment Categories Between Students

In the context of music, the Merdeka Curriculum allows students to study not only music theory but also music practice and creation. Some students who show high scores in the Making Creating category are likely to be involved in creating musical works, an activity that is highly valued in the Merdeka Curriculum. This hands-on experience is a very effective way to develop creativity and understanding of the arts.

4. Discussion

The successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang can be attributed to the application of teaching modules tailored to the five elements of the learning syntax. Each element significantly contributes to the development of students' skills in the context of music arts. In the "Experiencing" element, students were introduced to ensemble music through an in-depth, practical approach, allowing them to "experience" music directly. This stage supports the findings of (Budiman et al., 2020; Erim et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2024), who noted that experiential learning enhances students' understanding and engagement. This observation also indicates that students who actively engage in the learning process are more responsive to the material being taught.

The "Reflecting" stage showed that students began to develop a deeper understanding of the musical context they were learning, including an appreciation of local culture. This aligns with the findings of (Daud et al., 2024; and Holmes and Tuomi, 2022), which suggest that reflection encourages students to think critically and enhances their comprehension of the learning material. In the "Thinking and Working Artistically" stage, students were not only technically trained but also began to explore the artistic aspects of playing music. The application of this element indicates that the Merdeka Curriculum is effective in instilling artistic thinking skills among students.

In the "Creating" element, students demonstrated high creativity in arranging ensemble music using the pianika. This aspect of creation reflects constructivist educational theory, where the learning process provides space for students to produce new works as a form of personal expression and interpretation. The study by (Mattar, 2018) also emphasizes the importance of the creative element in supporting experiential learning. Finally, the "Impacting" element allowed students to showcase their work to an audience, which played a role in building their confidence and social skills. The implementation of the Impacting element reinforces the role of the Merdeka Curriculum in preparing students to make positive contributions to society through the arts (Hunaepi et al., 2023; Pasaribu, 2023).

Although this study demonstrates the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in music arts education, several limitations should be noted. First, this research was conducted with a limited sample at a single school, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Second, limitations in the evaluation instruments used may affect the accuracy in measuring each syntax element in-depth. The observations conducted may also contain potential bias, although efforts have been made to maintain validity through content validation by experts (Firmansyah, 2023).

Recommendations for future research include expanding the sample and conducting cross-school studies to strengthen the validity and reliability of these findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, developing more diverse and precise evaluation instruments is advised to provide a more accurate picture of students' achievements in each syntax element of the Merdeka Curriculum (Kuantitatif, 2016). Further studies are also expected to explore the long-term impact of this curriculum on students' creative and collaborative skills development in arts education (Andaryani et al., 2024; Haerani et al., 2020).

This research makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in arts education, particularly in fostering students' creativity, critical thinking, and collaborative skills. With strong empirical evidence, this study is expected to serve as a foundation for the development of educational policies and learning methods that are more aligned with the needs of modern education.

5. Conclusion

The Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in music education at SMP Negeri 1 Padangpanjang has positively impacted student outcomes. Through ensemble activities using the Pianika, the curriculum fosters active participation, creativity, and collaboration. The five learning syntax elements—Experiencing, Reflecting, Thinking and Working Artistically, Creating, and Impacting—provide a flexible approach that enhances students' musical development. Emphasizing experiential learning, the curriculum deepens students' engagement with music and integrates local cultural elements to enrich their learning. However, challenges such as limited teacher training, inadequate resources, and insufficient class time were identified. Addressing these issues is vital for maximizing effectiveness. Future efforts should focus on supporting teachers, improving infrastructure, and expanding research. Despite challenges, the study highlights the Merdeka Curriculum's transformative potential in music education, offering valuable insights for enhancing arts education in Indonesia.

6. Suggestion

In conclusion, the evidence from this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of EFL lecturers' research identities within the Vietnamese education reform setting. This research contributes to the growing body of empirical studies that demonstrates the importance of phenomenological approach in exploring the construction of research identities among tertiary EFL lecturers. It fills a gap in the field of ELT in Vietnam and has international relevance. The study also contributes to the development and future implementation of research policy in Vietnam.

Declarations

Author Contributions. All authors contributed equally to this work. They were collectively involved in conceptualizing the research, designing the methodology, collecting and analyzing data, interpreting results, and drafting and revising the manuscript. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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