



The Creativity of Islamic Cultural History Teachers in Implementing Various Learning Models of the Merdeka Curriculum at MAN 3 East Aceh

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Islamic Cultural History teachers apply creativity when implementing varied learning models under the Merdeka Curriculum at State Islamic Senior High School 3 East Aceh. It has three objectives: to describe this creativity, to analyze its impact on learning, and to identify the factors that support or inhibit it. The study used a qualitative case study design. Key informants were the principal, Islamic Cultural History teachers, and students. Data came from interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings show three results. First, teachers demonstrated creativity by using diverse learning models and by integrating and adapting Cooperative Learning, Project-Based Learning, and Discovery Learning. They applied these models systematically and fitted them to the classroom context, which made learning more effective, dynamic, and student-centered. Second, this creativity increased student participation and engagement. Students built their understanding gradually and meaningfully. They memorized historical facts, linked historical events to present-day realities, and interpreted the values embedded in them. Third, adequate facilities and infrastructure strengthened teachers' capacity to innovate. Limited access to continuous, relevant professional training constrained their professional development. These results suggest that schools can sustain teacher creativity by pairing adequate resources with regular, subject-specific training.

1. Introduction

Schools and madrasahs report mixed results from the Merdeka Curriculum(Kuntoro et al., 2026) . Some institutions have adopted creative, innovative learning practices(Isnabet et al., 2025) .Many others struggle with limited facilities and infrastructure, insufficient teacher understanding and readiness, and learning cultures that have changed little(Jauhari et al., 2025) . In this context, teacher creativity largely determines whether the curriculum transforms classroom practice or remains an administrative change on paper(Aisyah et al., 2025) . This situation is especially relevant to teaching Islamic Cultural History (Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam, SKI) at the Madrasah Aliyah level, where teachers need diverse, contextual pedagogical approaches(Yusaini, 2026) . SKI aims to do more than deliver historical facts. It also instills Islamic values, develops historical awareness, and builds students' Islamic cultural identity(Khairunnisa et al., 2025) .

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MAN 3 East Aceh is an Islamic senior secondary school that has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. It operates in a religious socio-cultural setting and serves a heterogeneous student population. These conditions require teachers to adapt their instructional strategies to students' needs, including in Islamic Cultural History. SKI teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh often struggle to turn historical material, which students frequently see as monotonous and hard to understand, into learning that is meaningful, enjoyable, and inspiring (Fauzan et al., 2023). Preliminary observations at MAN 3 East Aceh show that the SKI teacher, identified as KA, relies mainly on assignment-based instruction, such as papers and academic essays. The teacher has not yet used diverse learning models to their full potential.

Teachers still need to strengthen their ability to design varied learning models and to integrate digital media effectively, particularly in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. This gap limits how fully madrasah teachers can apply the curriculum's student-centered approach, and it frames the problem this study addresses (Risna, 2023). This curriculum requires teachers to be more flexible and creative in designing contextual and student-centered learning. Therefore, pedagogical competence and technological proficiency are important aspects that teachers need to continuously develop (Annafiah et al., 2026).

Teacher creativity in implementing learning models varies, some teachers apply creative models aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum, while others rely on conventional methods (Skrbinjek et al., 2024). These differences affect students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) and their level of engagement (Desianti et al., 2022). Students also need more variety in learning models, more active participation, and more use of digital technology (Anderson et al., 2022). A digital classroom program that adapts learning to advances in information and communication technology and supports the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on student-centered, flexible, innovative, and technology-integrated learning (Maor et al., 2025). The program demands creativity from teachers, who must master the subject matter, choose models that fit students' characteristics, and use the available digital facilities (Mursid et al., 2022). This demand is greater in SKI, because students often find historical content dull when it is delivered conventionally (Derakhshan et al., 2022).

SKI teachers employed models such as Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Discovery Learning, and Cooperative Learning to make lessons more active and meaningful (Zulyusri et al., 2023). Examples include student projects on prominent figures of Islamic civilization, simulations of historical events, digital timelines, and critical discussions of Islamic values in contemporary contexts. These approaches require creativity, pedagogical readiness, technological competence, and willingness to experiment (Umar, 2024).

This study offers three contributions. It shows how far teachers can express creativity in designing and implementing learning models. It identifies the challenges teachers face in developing that creativity. It also provides practical recommendations for teachers, madrasah principals, and other stakeholders to improve SKI instruction. A clearer picture of teacher creativity can help make SKI learning at MAN 3 East Aceh more effective and student-centered, and deepen students' appreciation of Islamic history and its values. The Merdeka Curriculum gives teachers a flexible framework, and its success depends largely on how creatively they use that freedom.

The study is limited to the creativity of SKI teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh in implementing learning models that the Merdeka Curriculum recommends: PjBL, PBL, Discovery Learning, Inquiry Learning, Cooperative Learning, and Differentiated Learning. Teacher creativity is a broader concept. It also covers lesson design, teaching methods, media and technology, teaching materials, assessment, and classroom management. This study examines only learning models, because they are a core component of the Merdeka Curriculum's student-centered approach. The narrower focus allows a

deeper investigation that reflects actual SKI instruction at MAN 3 East Aceh, particularly within the digital classroom program.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach with a single-case study design (Gioia, 2021). Qualitative inquiry fits the research problem because it explores the processes, meanings, and dynamics of teachers' instructional practice in a natural setting. The case study design supported an in-depth examination of how Islamic Cultural History (SKI) teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh enacted creativity when implementing learning models under the Merdeka Curriculum. The bounded case was SKI instruction at this madrasah, including its practices, creative strategies, and the factors that supported or inhibited them.

2.2 Research Site

The study took place at State Islamic Senior High School 3 East Aceh (Madrasah Aliyah Negeri, MAN 3 East Aceh), East Aceh Regency, Aceh Province, Indonesia. Three criteria guided site selection. The madrasah has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in SKI, which makes it relevant to the research problem. Its students come from heterogeneous backgrounds, which creates varied instructional demands. The madrasah also gave the researcher access and support for fieldwork.

2.3 Data Collection

The researcher collected data through observation, interviews, and documentation. Classroom observations recorded how the teacher applied learning models in practice [state the number of observations, class level, and duration] (Sayehvand et al., 2025). Semi-structured interviews with the teacher, principal, and students captured their experiences and perspectives [state the interview format and approximate length]. Documentation supplied institutional and instructional records that supported and cross-checked the field data.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model of (Furidha & Sidoarjo, 2023) in three steps. Data reduction selected, simplified, and organized field notes, interview transcripts, and documents. Data display arranged the reduced data into narrative and thematic matrices. Conclusion drawing identified patterns and verified them against the data. These steps ran iteratively throughout the study, not in strict sequence.

3. Results

3.1 The Creativity of Islamic Cultural History Teachers in Implementing Various Learning Models within the Merdeka Curriculum at MAN 3 East Aceh

Based on the findings of this study conducted at MAN 3 East Aceh, teacher creativity was reflected in the teachers' ability to select, modify, and combine various learning models in accordance with the characteristics of SKI subject matter, learning objectives, as well as students' needs and conditions. This finding is consistent with learning model theories that emphasize the importance of designing adaptive, student-centered instruction capable of stimulating students' active engagement through the selection of appropriate instructional strategies.

These findings are also in line with previous studies by Rahman (2023) and Kustati, which suggest that creativity in educational contexts emerges when teachers are able to create challenging and flexible learning situations that provide students with opportunities to think critically, explore ideas, and develop solutions independently.

The variety of learning models implemented by SKI teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh, such as Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Discovery Learning, collaborative discussions, and classroom presentations, demonstrates teachers' efforts to integrate active and contextual approaches into the learning process. Project-Based Learning (PjBL), for example, provides students with practical learning experiences, enabling them to work independently or collaboratively to produce tangible products while simultaneously developing twenty-first-century skills such as creativity, collaboration, communication, and responsibility. This practice is consistent with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasize student-centered learning, competency development, and contextual and meaningful learning experiences.

Furthermore, the implementation of Discovery Learning encourages students to actively discover concepts, values, and meanings derived from historical events rather than merely receiving information passively. This approach provides opportunities for developing critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and learner autonomy. The theory of Discovery Learning supports these findings, asserting that learning becomes more effective when students are directly involved in constructing knowledge through observation, experimentation, and reflection.

The combination of various learning models with brief lectures as introductory activities and interactive question-and-answer sessions indicates a flexible blended instructional approach, in which teachers adjust instructional strategies according to classroom conditions. This strategy is aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasize teachers' flexibility in selecting learning models and instructional methods that are relevant to the competencies to be achieved as well as to students' characteristics. Classroom observations revealed that students became more active, motivated, and capable of critical thinking, while teachers had greater flexibility in adapting instructional strategies to meet students' learning needs.

SKI teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh demonstrated notable creativity in combining and modifying various instructional methods as a form of adaptation to the Merdeka Curriculum. Rather than applying a single instructional method, teachers integrated brief lectures, question-and-answer sessions, group discussions, classroom presentations, Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Discovery Learning, as well as reflection and comprehension-based assignments within a single sequence of learning activities. This finding is consistent with learning model theory, which emphasizes the need for teachers to design instruction systematically and adaptively in accordance with the characteristics of the subject matter, learning objectives, and students' needs.

Teachers' creativity in modifying instructional methods can also be associated with theories of creativity, which posit that creativity involves divergent thinking, flexibility, and the development of alternative solutions. In the context of SKI instruction at MAN 3 East Aceh, teachers demonstrated creative abilities by integrating various instructional methods and media, including the use of digital media, presentation slides, videos, and online learning resources, to transform abstract and chronological historical content into more contextual, engaging, and comprehensible learning materials for students. This strategy encouraged students to actively participate in the learning process, think critically, engage in discussions, collaborate with peers, and develop twenty-first-century skills such as communication, collaboration, and responsibility.

Furthermore, the implementation of this combination of instructional methods is aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasize student-centered learning, teachers' flexibility in selecting instructional methods based on learning outcomes, and contextual and meaningful learning experiences. For example, the lecture method was used only as an introduction to the lesson and was combined with question-and-answer activities to assess students' prior understanding. The core learning activities were subsequently continued through group discussions, presentations of learning outcomes, and Discovery Learning activities, thereby providing students with opportunities to observe, gather information, discuss, and independently draw conclusions regarding the learning material. This approach not only increased student engagement but also fostered reflective thinking and deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Based on the findings obtained through interviews and classroom observations, the combination and modification of instructional methods indicate that the creativity of SKI teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh plays a significant role in creating diverse, participatory, and student-centered learning environments. This creativity extends beyond mere variation in instructional methods; it also involves the systematic selection and

adaptation of instructional strategies to ensure that the learning process becomes more effective, engaging, and compatible with the characteristics of SKI subject matter. These findings support learning model theories and the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, while simultaneously demonstrating how teacher creativity can enhance students' motivation, participation, and understanding in SKI learning.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the creativity of SKI teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh in implementing various learning models not only fulfills the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum but also creates more meaningful, interactive, and student-centered learning experiences. These findings support learning model theories that emphasize the importance of variation, adaptation, and the combination of instructional methods in order to ensure effective learning and promote the comprehensive development of students' competencies.

3.2 The Impact of SKI Teachers' Creativity in Implementing Various Learning Models of the Merdeka Curriculum at MAN 3 East Aceh

The findings of this study at MAN 3 East Aceh indicate that the creativity of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) teachers in implementing various learning models within the Merdeka Curriculum has had a significant impact on the quality and dynamics of the learning process. Teacher creativity was reflected in their ability to design, combine, and modify instructional methods in accordance with the characteristics of the subject matter, classroom conditions, and students' needs.

One of the most evident impacts was the increase in student participation. This participation was not limited to physical involvement but also encompassed cognitive and emotional engagement, as students at MAN 3 East Aceh actively participated in discussions, expressed their opinions, posed questions, and responded to their classmates' presentations. Teachers' creativity in varying instructional methods, such as Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Discovery Learning, group discussions, and classroom presentations, provided students with opportunities to actively engage in thinking processes, collaborate with peers, and manage information. These findings are consistent with previous studies on creativity, which emphasize that challenging and flexible learning environments that allow freedom of thought can enhance students' creativity as well as their engagement in the learning process.

Furthermore, the combination of digital media, audiovisual materials, brief lectures, question-and-answer sessions, and reflection activities demonstrates that the creativity of SKI teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh not only makes learning more engaging but also facilitates a deeper understanding of the subject matter. The principles of the Merdeka Curriculum emphasize student-centered learning, teacher flexibility, and the contextuality and relevance of learning materials. The implementation of these strategies creates a safe and conducive learning environment in which students feel valued and motivated to participate actively without fear of making mistakes. In this context, SKI teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh function as facilitators who guide students, provide appreciation, and reinforce student participation, thereby fostering collaborative and communicative classroom interactions.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the creativity of SKI teachers in implementing various learning models within the Merdeka Curriculum has a positive impact on student participation and understanding. Teacher creativity not only increases the quantitative level of student involvement but also enhances the quality of participation through students' active engagement in critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and meaningful interpretation of learning materials. These findings reinforce previous theories of instructional models that emphasize flexibility and adaptation in teaching methods, the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum that promote student-centered learning, and theories of creativity that highlight the importance of a challenging and supportive learning environment that enables the free exploration of ideas.

The creativity of SKI teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh in implementing various learning models within the Merdeka Curriculum plays a significant role in facilitating students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) materials. Students' understanding is reflected not only in improved learning outcomes but also in their ability to explain the material in their own words, relate historical concepts to everyday life contexts, and interpret the values embedded in historical events of Islamic civilization. This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that knowledge is actively acquired through experience, social interaction, and reflection on the learning material. For example, through Project-Based Learning (PjBL), students are provided

with opportunities to transform learning materials into tangible products, such as simple instructional media, thematic summaries, or visual presentations. This process encourages students to construct their own knowledge, thereby making the material more concrete, understandable, and meaningful.

The use of group discussions and classroom presentations also contributes to strengthening students' understanding, as these methods enable them to process information collaboratively, engage in discussions, and express their opinions. In this context, the teacher acts as a facilitator by providing guidance, clarification, and appreciation for students' participation, thereby creating a safe, conducive, and supportive learning environment that promotes active engagement.

3.3 Supporting and Inhibiting Factors Affecting the Creativity of SKI Teachers in Implementing Various Learning Models within the Merdeka Curriculum at MAN 3 East Aceh

The findings of this study at MAN 3 East Aceh indicate that the creativity of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) teachers in implementing various learning models within the Merdeka Curriculum is strongly influenced by both supporting and inhibiting factors. One of the most significant supporting factors is the availability of adequate educational facilities and infrastructure. The availability of these facilities not only supports the smooth implementation of the learning process but also provides teachers with opportunities to innovate, combine, and modify instructional methods more flexibly in accordance with students' needs and the characteristics of SKI subject matter.

These findings are consistent with creativity theory, which emphasizes the importance of environmental factors in fostering and developing creativity. A supportive environment, in this case in the form of adequate facilities and infrastructure, provides teachers with the freedom to experiment with various instructional approaches, digital and audiovisual media, as well as collaborative learning activities, thereby making the learning process more engaging, diverse, and contextual. For instance, the availability of LCD projectors, laptops, whiteboards, internet access, and online learning resources enables SKI teachers to present abstract and chronological historical materials in a clearer and more interactive manner through presentation slides, historical videos, and project-based assignments.

The availability of physical learning resources, such as reference books, modules, and supplementary instructional materials, also facilitates teachers in designing creative and student-centered learning activities. This condition is aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasize teachers' flexibility in selecting instructional methods and strategies, as well as students' active involvement in the learning process. With adequate facilities, teachers are able to develop combinations of instructional methods, including Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Discovery Learning, group discussions, presentations, and reflection activities, enabling students not only to receive information passively but also to actively engage in processing, understanding, and interpreting the learning materials.

Interviews with teachers and the madrasah principal revealed that such facility support has a direct impact on creating a conducive learning environment. A conducive learning environment enhances students' enthusiasm and motivation while facilitating discussions, concept discovery, and the active expression of opinions.

Classroom observations further supported these findings, showing that the utilization of facilities and infrastructure, such as appropriate classroom spaces, digital media, and internet access, enables SKI teachers to present learning materials in visual and contextual forms, thereby making complex historical concepts easier for students to understand. Thus, educational facilities and infrastructure not only support the technical aspects of instruction but also serve as catalysts for teacher creativity in designing innovative, interactive, and Merdeka Curriculum-oriented learning experiences.

It can therefore be concluded that the availability of educational facilities and infrastructure at MAN 3 East Aceh constitutes a strategic factor in strengthening the creativity of SKI teachers.

Adequate facilities provide teachers with opportunities to integrate various instructional models and methods, utilize digital media, and create engaging and conducive learning environments. Such conditions not only improve the quality of instruction but also support the achievement of the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, namely student-centered, meaningful, and applicable learning experiences.

On the other hand, one of the inhibiting factors in the development of SKI teachers' creativity is the lack of continuous professional training. Although teachers have demonstrated initiative and creativity in designing instruction, limited training has affected their understanding and skills in implementing innovative learning models. These findings are consistent with creativity theory, which emphasizes that the development of creative abilities depends not only on individual potential but also on environmental factors, experiences, and systematic support. In this context, continuous professional training functions as an external stimulus that provides teachers with knowledge, strategies, and practical experiences for developing diverse instructional models. Without adequate training, teachers tend to rely on familiar teaching methods, resulting in the underutilization of creative and student-centered instructional strategies.

Furthermore, the lack of training also limits teachers' ability to utilize interactive learning media and digital platforms. In fact, the Merdeka Curriculum requires the integration of technology to support active, participatory, and contextual learning processes. This finding is consistent with theories suggesting that effective learning occurs when students actively construct knowledge through interactions with their environment and instructional media. However, when teachers are not accustomed to or lack proficiency in utilizing digital media, opportunities for student interaction and engagement become limited, thereby preventing the optimization of innovative and enjoyable learning experiences.

The results of interviews and classroom observations conducted in SKI classes at MAN 3 East Aceh revealed that, although educational facilities and infrastructure are available and support a conducive learning environment, SKI teachers still encounter difficulties in optimally implementing innovative learning models. Teachers often continue to rely on lectures, simple question-and-answer activities, or basic projects due to limited practical knowledge regarding new instructional methods. This condition indicates that teacher creativity is influenced not only by personal motivation or initiative but also by opportunities to participate in professional training, mentoring, and continuous professional development. Within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, teacher training constitutes an important strategy for fostering systematic, sustainable, and student-centered creativity. Through regular and relevant training programs, teachers can enhance their ability to design, modify, and combine instructional methods, integrate technology into teaching, and increase students' active engagement.

4. Conclusions

Based on the findings and discussion presented in the previous chapter, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. SKI teachers at MAN 3 East Aceh demonstrated considerable creativity in varying, combining, and modifying different instructional models and methods. Rather than relying on a single teaching method, teachers systematically integrated brief lectures, question-and-answer sessions, group discussions, classroom presentations, Discovery Learning, Project-Based Learning (PjBL), and reflection activities. These combinations of instructional methods were implemented flexibly in accordance with the characteristics of the subject matter and students' needs, making the learning process more diverse, engaging, and less monotonous. The lecture method, which was previously teacher-centered and one-directional, was

- modified into an interactive introduction accompanied by guiding questions and question-and-answer activities, enabling teachers to assess students' prior understanding.
2. Teacher creativity had significant impacts on both the learning process and learning outcomes. These impacts were evident in two main aspects. First, there was an increase in student participation. Teacher creativity encouraged students to become more actively engaged physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Students participated in discussions, presentations, projects, and reflection activities, resulting in intensive, collaborative, and communicative interactions. This active participation enhanced students' self-confidence, willingness to ask questions, critical thinking abilities, and social skills. Moreover, the implementation of diverse and non-monotonous learning activities increased students' learning motivation, making them more focused, enthusiastic, and comfortable in expressing their ideas. Second, teacher creativity facilitated students' understanding of SKI materials. The creative combination of instructional methods enabled students to comprehend learning materials gradually, deeply, and contextually. The use of Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Discovery Learning, and digital media assisted students in actively constructing knowledge, understanding the interrelationships among historical events, and interpreting historical values.
 3. Regarding supporting and inhibiting factors, adequate educational facilities and infrastructure emerged as key factors in promoting teacher creativity. Facilities such as appropriate classrooms, digital learning media, internet access, and both printed and online learning resources provided teachers with opportunities to develop innovative, engaging, and student-centered instructional strategies. A conducive learning environment also enhanced students' active participation. In contrast, the lack of continuous and structured professional training constituted the primary inhibiting factor. Limited training opportunities resulted in variations in teachers' understanding of innovative instructional methods, causing some teachers to continue relying on familiar teaching approaches.

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