

THE EFFECT OF THE INDEPENDENT LEARNING POLICY ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH TEACHER PERFORMANCE AS A MEDIATING VARIABLE

Sumardiyanto¹, * Dassucik² & Lusi Endang Sri D.³

^{1, 2, 3} Dosen STKIP PGRI Situbondo

Email: sumardiyanto@stkippgri-situbondo.ac.id

*korespondensi: dassucik75@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the impact of the Independent Learning Policy on student achievement, focusing on the mediating role of teacher performance. Utilizing a quantitative research approach with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis through SmartPLS 4, the study analyzed data collected from a sample of 196 grade 9 students from three junior high schools in Situbondo Regency. The results indicate that the Independent Learning Policy significantly influences both teacher performance (path coefficient = 0.668, T-statistic = 19.174, $p < 0.000$) and student achievement (path coefficient = 0.414, T-statistic = 7.741, $p < 0.000$). Teacher performance was also found to have a substantial direct impact on student achievement (path coefficient = 0.558, T-statistic = 9.900, $p < 0.000$) and acted as a critical mediator, amplifying the policy's effect on student outcomes (indirect path coefficient = 0.373, T-statistic = 8.273, $p < 0.000$). The adjusted R^2 values further reinforce the model's robustness, with 44.3% of teacher performance variance and 78.9% of student achievement variance explained by the Independent Learning Policy and teacher performance. These findings emphasize the necessity of empowering teachers through professional development and resource allocation to maximize the effectiveness of educational policies. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of policy implementation in education and offers practical recommendations for enhancing educational outcomes in junior high schools.

Keywords: Independent Learning Policy, Teacher Performance, Student Achievement, Situbondo Regency

INTRODUCTION

Situbondo Regency, located on the east coast of Java Island, is known as an area that has a high commitment to education. With various educational institutions spread across its region, Situbondo continues to strive to improve the quality of education through programs that support the development of student potential[1]. Various schools in Situbondo have shown brilliant achievements, both in the academic and non-academic fields, which not only bring pride to the region, but also have a positive

impact on human resource development[2]. In this context, a number of junior high schools (SMP) in Situbondo, such as SMPN 2 Sumbermalang, SMPN 1 Kalianget, and SMP Negeri 3 Situbondo, are real examples of institutions that have succeeded in producing outstanding students.

SMPN 2 Sumbermalang is one of the leading junior high schools in Situbondo Regency. Known for its commitment to quality education, this school has managed to score various academic and non-academic achievements. The students of SMPN 2 Sumbermalang have consistently shown their excellence in various competitions, ranging from district-level science olympiads to cultural arts competitions. This achievement is inseparable from the support of adequate facilities and the dedication of teachers who always provide optimal guidance to students. With a high spirit of competition, the students of this school continue to strive to bring the good name of the school to a higher level[3].

SMPN 1 Kalianget is also no less competitive in producing outstanding students. Located in the strategic area of Situbondo Regency, this school is known as an educational center that emphasizes innovation and development of student potential. Various achievements achieved by SMPN 1 Kalianget students include champions in the field of sports, such as futsal and badminton, to academic achievements in English debate competitions. This success shows that SMPN 1 Kalianget not only focuses on academic achievement, but also supports the development of students' talents in other fields. With a competitive learning atmosphere, this school continues to encourage students to excel and become a superior generation[4].

Meanwhile, SMP Negeri 3 Situbondo has proven itself as one of the schools that consistently produces outstanding students in various fields. With a diverse range of extracurricular programs, the school provides opportunities for students to develop their potential, whether in art, sports, or technology. One of the proud achievements of SMP Negeri 3 Situbondo is the success of students in winning the provincial level technology innovation competition, showing that their students are able to compete in the digital era. Not only that, various awards won in art and culture competitions also strengthen the school's reputation as an educational institution that supports the holistic development of students. With a conducive environment, this school continues to be the birthplace of outstanding students who are able to compete at the national and international levels[5].

Student achievements, which have been the pride of various schools, are now facing serious challenges with the emergence of a phenomenon of declining achievement at various levels of education. This phenomenon can be seen from the decline in student awards in competitions both at the local, regional, and national levels. One of the main causes of this decline is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which has forced the education system to switch to online learning methods, which has not been able to completely replace the effectiveness of face-to-face learning. Limited access to technological devices and internet networks in several regions is also an

obstacle that exacerbates the decline in the quality of student learning. As a result, students' ability to understand the material and prepare for the competition is less than optimal.

In addition to technological factors, this phenomenon is also influenced by a decrease in student learning motivation due to the lack of social interaction in the school environment. Losing moments of togetherness at school during the pandemic has made many students lose their enthusiasm to participate in learning and self-development programs. The decline in the intensity of extracurricular training, which has been an important forum in honing students' talents and potential, is also the cause of their declining achievements. This condition requires serious attention from various parties, ranging from educational institutions, the government, to parents, to jointly create solutions that can restore students' enthusiasm for learning and support the improvement of their achievements, one of which is with teacher performance interventions.

Teacher performance is the result achieved by teachers in carrying out assigned tasks based on skills, experience, and sincerity as well as effective use of time [6]. This performance includes the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of a quality learning process in the classroom[7]. Factors that affect teacher performance include the principal's leadership, teacher competence, and teachers' work motivation in carrying out their duties [8]. Teacher performance is also influenced by a supportive work environment and teacher discipline in carrying out their duties [9]. In the context of the Freedom of Learning policy, the role of teacher performance has become increasingly crucial in encouraging student achievement[10].

The Independent Learning Policy is an initiative from the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia which aims to provide greater freedom and flexibility to teachers, students, and schools in managing the learning process [11]. This policy is designed to improve the quality of education by allowing educators to innovate and be creative without being limited by rigid rules[12]. With this policy, it is hoped that students can be more active in learning and develop their potential to the maximum [13]. In addition, Merdeka Belajar also encourages the disclosure of school information and increases public satisfaction with school performance [14].

Various studies have been conducted to explore the influence of teacher performance, and the implementation of education policies on student achievement. Teacher performance is an important factor that affects student achievement. Research states that teacher performance has a significant influence on student achievement [15]. However, other studies found that there was no significant influence of lecturer performance on student achievement [16]. This shows that the context of education and school level may affect the results of the study, so further research is needed in the context of elementary schools. Research shows that teacher performance has a direct influence on the implementation of education policies, including Freedom of Learning [17]. However, not all studies found consistent results, suggesting the need for further

research to understand the factors influencing the implementation of education policies. The implementation of the Freedom of Learning policy is expected to have a positive impact on student achievement. Research states that effective education policies have a positive influence on student achievement in elementary school [15]. However, other findings state that there is no significant influence of education policies on student achievement in certain contexts [16].

That's gap emphasizes the need for further research to explore how the implementation of the Freedom of Learning policy can be optimized to improve student achievement in various educational contexts. Based on the research phenomenon and the gaps found, this study aims to fill these gaps with focus. By paying attention to the gaps in previous studies that showed inconsistent results on the influence of teacher performance on student achievement, as well as how the Merdeka Learning policy was implemented, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive insight, with the hope of providing concrete recommendations for improving the quality of education in public elementary schools in Jember Regency.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a quantitative research design using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4 app, this method to analyze the relationships between the independent learning policy, teacher performance, and student achievement. PLS-SEM was chosen due to its suitability for exploring complex models with multiple variables and its ability to handle small to medium sample sizes effectively. This method also supports simultaneous testing of direct and indirect effects, making it particularly valuable for examining teacher performance as a mediating variable.

The random sampling method was used to select participants from grade 9 across the three schools to ensure that the sample is representative of the population. Random sampling reduces selection bias and increases the generalizability of the findings. The total sample size of 196 was determined based on statistical recommendations, ensuring adequate power for the PLS-SEM analysis. By focusing on these selected schools and grade levels, the study seeks to provide robust evidence on the interplay between the Independent Learning Policy, teacher performance, and student achievement, offering actionable insights for educational policymakers and practitioners.

The sample for this study was drawn from three schools in Situbondo Regency, SMPN 2 Sumbermalang, SMPN 1 Kalianget, and SMP Negeri 3 Situbondo. These schools were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on their reputation for academic excellence and their active participation in implementing the Independent Learning Policy. These schools represent a balance of diverse educational settings in terms of geographical location and institutional resources, allowing for a more generalized understanding of the factors influencing student achievement. By selecting

schools with a track record of performance, the study aims to capture meaningful insights into how policy and teacher performance impact student outcomes.

This study specifically targeted grade 9 students as the sample population, with a total of 196 participants distributed across the three schools. Grade 9 students were chosen because they are at the culmination of their junior high school education, where academic pressure and achievement are at their peak. This grade level is also critical as it prepares students for the transition to senior high school, making it a strategic point for evaluating the impact of educational policies and teacher performance. Moreover, grade 9 students are more likely to have been exposed to the Independent Learning Policy for a substantial duration, allowing for a clearer assessment of its outcomes.

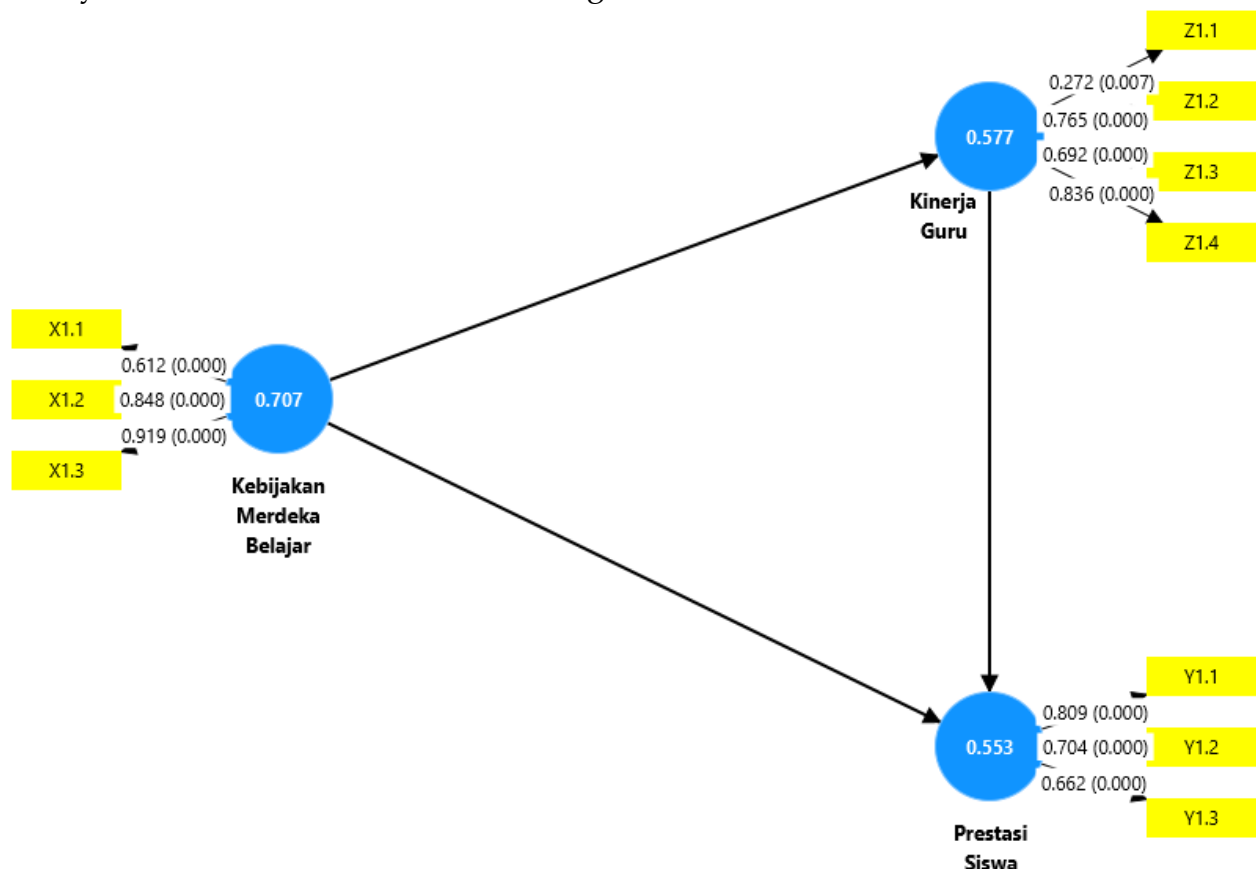


Figure 1. Outer Model Result

The outer model analysis demonstrates strong reliability and validity of the constructs within the study. The Cronbach's Alpha (CA) values for each latent variable indicate sufficient internal consistency, with "Independent Learning Policy" showing a CA of 0.707, "Teacher Performance" at 0.577, and "Student Achievement" at 0.553, all exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.5. The factor loadings for the indicators are all significant ($p < 0.001$), with notable contributions such as X1.3 (0.919) for "Independent Learning Policy," Z1.4 (0.836) for "Teacher Performance," and Y1.1 (0.809) for "Student Achievement." These findings confirm that the indicators adequately represent their respective constructs, supporting their reliability and convergent validity for further structural model analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this study provide a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the Independent Learning Policy, teacher performance, and student achievement in junior high schools in Situbondo Regency. By employing SmartPLS 4 as the analytical tool, the study evaluates both the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model) to understand how these variables interact and influence one another. The findings highlight the crucial role of teacher performance as a mediating variable in translating the impact of the Independent Learning Policy into improved student achievement. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of the dynamics between policy implementation and educational outcomes.

The outer model results confirm the validity and reliability of the constructs, with all Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding the minimum threshold and all indicator loadings showing statistical significance. These findings indicate that the constructs are wellrepresented by their respective indicators, providing a strong foundation for further structural analysis. Additionally, the inner model results shed light on the direct and indirect effects of the Independent Learning Policy on student achievement, emphasizing the mediating role of teacher performance in optimizing educational outcomes. This analysis offers actionable insights for policymakers and educators to enhance the effectiveness of educational policies and improve student performance.

Table 2. Inner Model Result

Path	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Kebijakan_Merdeka_Belajar -> Kinerja_Guru	0.668	0.670	0.035	19.174	0.000
Kebijakan_Merdeka_Belajar -> Prestasi_Siswa	0.414	0.415	0.053	7.741	0.000
Kinerja_Guru -> Prestasi_Siswa	0.558	0.558	0.056	9.900	0.000
Kebijakan_Merdeka_Belajar -> Kinerja_Guru -> Prestasi_Siswa	0.373	0.374	0.045	8.273	0.000

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2024)

The inner model analysis reveals significant relationships between the Independent Learning Policy, teacher performance, and student achievement. The direct effect of the Independent Learning Policy on teacher performance is substantial, with a path coefficient of 0.668, a T-statistic of 19.174, and a p-value of 0.000. These

results underscore the critical role of policy implementation in enhancing teacher performance. The findings align with prior research indicating that supportive educational policies enable teachers to innovate and adapt more effectively in the classroom, thereby fostering higher levels of performance. This relationship highlights the importance of ensuring that policies such as the Independent Learning Policy are well-communicated and adequately supported by resources to maximize their impact.

Additionally, the analysis shows a direct positive effect of the Independent Learning Policy on student achievement, with a path coefficient of 0.414, a T-statistic of 7.741, and a p-value of 0.000. Although this effect is statistically significant, its magnitude is less pronounced compared to its impact on teacher performance. This suggests that while policy initiatives can directly improve student achievement, their influence is more effective when mediated through teacher performance. Furthermore, the direct effect of teacher performance on student achievement is particularly strong, with a path coefficient of 0.558, a T-statistic of 9.900, and a p-value of 0.000. This finding emphasizes the central role of teachers in shaping student outcomes, as their performance directly affects students' learning experiences and academic results.

The mediation analysis confirms the significant indirect effect of the Independent Learning Policy on student achievement through teacher performance, with a path coefficient of 0.373, a T-statistic of 8.273, and a p-value of 0.000. This result highlights teacher performance as a critical intermediary that amplifies the impact of educational policies on student outcomes. It demonstrates that policy initiatives aimed at improving education must prioritize empowering teachers through professional development, resource allocation, and supportive work environments. Together, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of the pathways through which educational policies influence student achievement, offering valuable insights for policymakers and educators to optimize the implementation of the Independent Learning Policy.

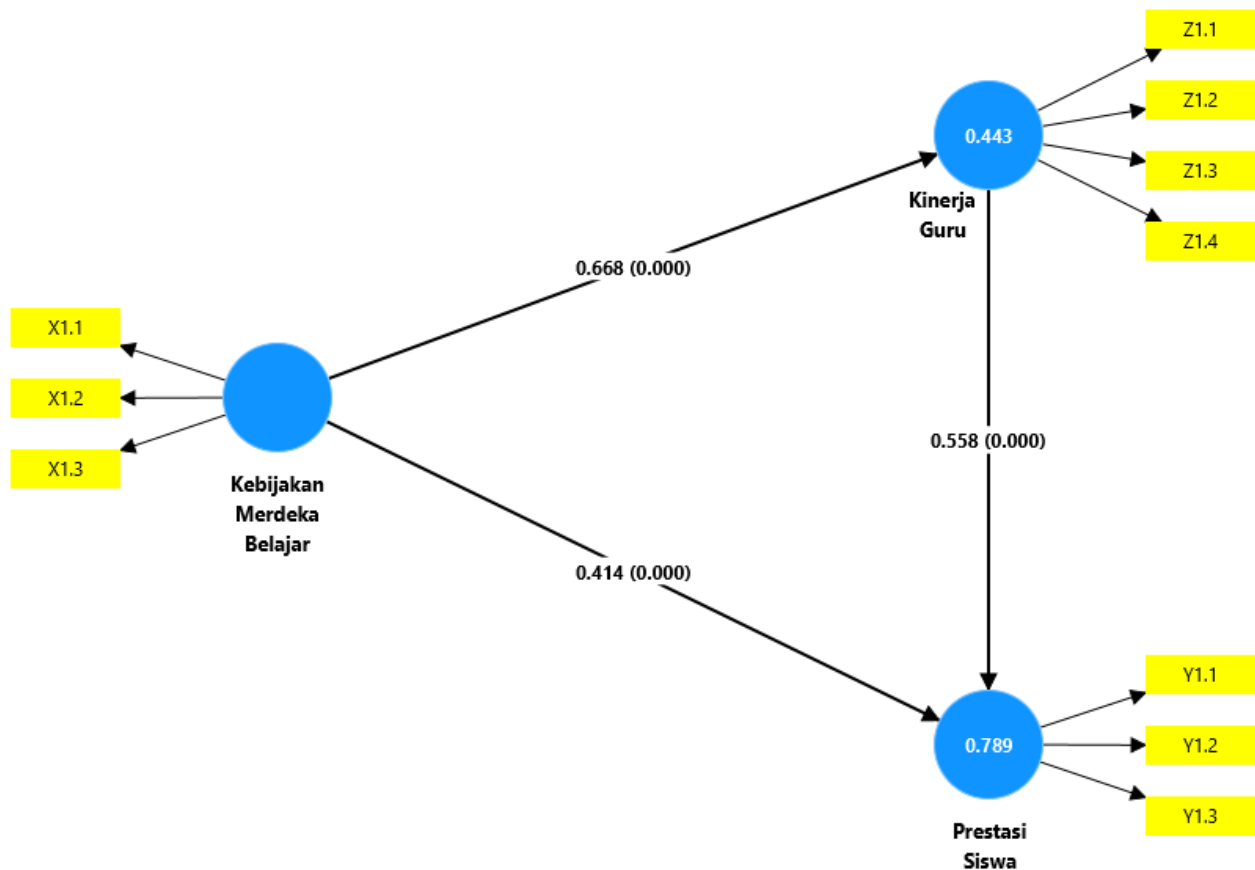


Figure 2. Path Analysis Results

The adjusted R^2 values presented in the path analysis reflect the predictive power of the model and provide insights into the influence of the Independent Learning Policy and teacher performance on student achievement. The adjusted R^2 for teacher performance (Kinerja Guru) is 0.443, indicating that 44.3% of the variance in teacher performance is explained by the Independent Learning Policy. This substantial value highlights the strong influence of the policy in shaping teacher performance. The implementation of this policy empowers educators to innovate and adapt their teaching methods, creating a supportive environment that fosters improved teacher effectiveness. These findings align with previous studies that underscore the importance of well-designed educational policies in enhancing teacher performance as a critical factor in achieving better educational outcomes.

The adjusted R^2 for student achievement (Prestasi Siswa) is 0.789, showing that 78.9% of the variance in student achievement is jointly explained by the Independent Learning Policy and teacher performance. This high explanatory power demonstrates the significant combined impact of these factors on student outcomes. Teacher performance plays a pivotal role as a mediating variable, amplifying the effect of the policy on student achievement. The findings indicate that while the Independent Learning Policy directly influences student achievement, its impact is considerably enhanced when mediated through improved teacher performance. This underscores the necessity for policymakers to prioritize teacher development and support as a central

strategy in maximizing the effectiveness of educational policies to drive student success.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide substantial insights into the intricate relationships between the Independent Learning Policy, teacher performance, and student achievement. The adjusted R^2 values reveal that the Independent Learning Policy explains 44.3% of the variance in teacher performance, while teacher performance and the policy together explain 78.9% of the variance in student achievement. These results emphasize the importance of aligning educational policy implementation with efforts to enhance teacher performance to optimize student outcomes [9]. Furthermore, the findings confirm the mediating role of teacher performance, highlighting its pivotal influence in amplifying the effect of policies on students' academic success [8].

The significant direct effect of the Independent Learning Policy on teacher performance (path coefficient = 0.668) underscores the critical role of well-designed educational policies in motivating and equipping educators to innovate and adapt their teaching methods. These findings align with research indicating that supportive policies and conducive work environments foster teacher engagement and performance [1]. Additionally, the strong direct relationship between teacher performance and student achievement (path coefficient = 0.558) corroborates previous studies demonstrating that teacher effectiveness is a primary driver of students' academic performance [15]. This suggests that investments in teacher capacity-building and professional development are essential to achieve the intended outcomes of educational policies [7].

The mediation analysis highlights the indirect effect of the Independent Learning Policy on student achievement through teacher performance (path coefficient = 0.373), affirming the importance of teacher performance as a key intermediary. This finding supports research asserting that policy interventions are more impactful when implemented through educators who are empowered to adapt and enhance instructional practices [9]. Moreover, the significant explanatory power of the model for student achievement ($R^2 = 0.789$) underscores the necessity of integrating teacher-focused initiatives with policy strategies to maximize their effectiveness [11]. These results emphasize that policies like the Independent Learning Policy must be accompanied by robust professional development, sufficient resources, and leadership support to achieve meaningful improvements in educational outcomes [8].

Practically, these findings highlight the need for targeted efforts to empower teachers through continuous professional development, resource provision, and effective leadership. Policymakers must ensure that policies provide clear guidelines, sufficient flexibility, and necessary support to enable teachers to innovate in their classroom[12]. Additionally, regular monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation are critical to ensuring alignment with educational goals and

addressing challenges in real-time [14]. By focusing on enhancing teacher performance as a central strategy, educational institutions and policymakers can create sustainable improvements in student achievement and overall educational quality [6].

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the pivotal role of the Independent Learning Policy in enhancing student achievement, particularly through its significant influence on teacher performance as a mediating variable. While the policy directly impacts student outcomes, its effectiveness is greatly amplified when mediated by improved teacher performance, as evidenced by the high explanatory power of the model (adjusted $R^2 = 0.789$). These results underscore the importance of aligning educational policies with initiatives that empower teachers through professional development, resource allocation, and supportive environments. The study emphasizes that optimizing policy implementation and prioritizing teacher capacity-building are critical to achieving sustained improvements in educational quality and student success, thereby providing actionable insights for policymakers and educators aiming to advance educational outcomes effectively.

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