

THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL ORIENTATION PROGRAMS (MPLS) ON STUDENTS' ADAPTATION AND LEARNING ABILITIES IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

**Lasdamena Siadari ¹, Herman Herman ^{2*}, Elina Lulu Bimawati Rumapea ³,
Wanny Christiana Tumewu ⁴, Ratna Taliupan ⁵, Tiodora Fermiska Silalahi ⁶**

¹ An English Teacher, SMP Kristen Methodist Pematangsiantar

Jl. Pane No. 34 Kecamatan Siantar Timur - Kota Pematangsiantar, Indonesia

² Department of English Education, Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar

Jl. Sangnawaluh No.4, Siopat Suhu, Kec. Siantar Tim., Kota Pematang Siantar, Sumatera Utara 21136, Indonesia

Email: herman@uhnnp.ac.id

³ Department of Accounting, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Petra Bitung

^{4,5} Department of Management, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Petra Bitung

Jl. S.H. Sarundajang, Depan Term. Induk Tangkoko, Kota Bitung, Sulawesi Utara 95545, Indonesia

⁶ Department of English Education, Universitas Simalungun

Jl. Sisingamangaraja Barat, Bah Kapul, Kec. Siantar Sitalasari, Kota Pematang Siantar, Sumatera Utara 21142, Indonesia

Abstract

The transition to junior high school is a critical period for students, often accompanied by challenges in adaptation and learning. This study investigates the influence of the *Masa Pengenalan Lingkungan Sekolah* (MPLS), a school orientation program, on the adaptation process and learning abilities of seventh-grade students at SMP Methodist Pematangsiantar, North Sumatera, Indonesia. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected from 144 students across six classes during the MPLS held from July 14 to 16, 2025. The study analyzed three phases of the program: preparation, implementation, and evaluation. Findings indicate that the preparation phase effectively reduced student anxiety by clarifying expectations. The implementation phase facilitated social integration, familiarization with school culture, and student engagement through interactive activities. Finally, the evaluation phase showed improvements in students' confidence, motivation, and overall adaptation to the new environment. These results suggest that MPLS significantly supports students in navigating the challenges of school transition, positively impacting their readiness to learn and participate. The study highlights the importance of structured orientation programs in promoting emotional, social, and academic adjustment in early adolescence. Recommendations include enhancing future MPLS programs by incorporating more academic exposure and peer collaboration opportunities to further strengthen student outcomes during school transitions.

Keywords: School Orientation, Student Adaptation, Learning Abilities, Masa Pengenalan Lingkungan Sekolah (MPLS)

INTRODUCTION

The School Orientation Program, commonly known as "Masa Pengenalan Lingkungan Sekolah" (MPLS) in Indonesia, serves as an initial activity designed to welcome new students at every formal education level, including Junior High School. This program aims to introduce students to the physical environment of the school, its rules, culture, and community, including teachers and fellow students. Beyond its ceremonial nature, the school orientation program holds significant potential in supporting students' adaptation to their new environment (Utami, 2020).

The transition from elementary to junior high school is often a challenging phase for many students. They face not only a new physical environment but also more demanding academic expectations, different learning methods, and broader social dynamics. In this context, successful adaptation becomes essential for students to fully engage in the learning process (Yunus, Hasanah, & Seda, 2023). A well-structured orientation program plays a critical role in helping students overcome this transition by providing necessary information, emotional support, and confidence to navigate the school environment.

Research suggests that a systematic school introduction can reduce students' anxiety and increase their sense of comfort in a new academic setting (Sirdifield et al., 2016). When students feel safe and accepted, they are more likely to stay focused, motivated, and engaged in learning. Therefore, an effective orientation program should not only provide formal information but also emphasize psychosocial support to help students adjust smoothly.

In addition to adaptation, students' learning abilities are also influenced by how they initially experience school life. Learning ability encompasses various factors such as attention, motivation, concentration, and learning strategies—all of which tend to improve when students feel a sense of belonging and comfort in their school environment (Bacon, 2012). Thus, school orientation can serve as a strategic foundation for building positive learning attitudes and readiness among new students.

However, in practice, the quality and content of orientation programs differ significantly across schools. Some institutions implement MPLS merely as a formal tradition, often neglecting the psychological and pedagogical dimensions that are crucial to holistic student development (Rahmat & R, 2021). In fact, when approached appropriately, orientation can serve as a long-term investment in shaping both the character and academic performance of students.

The importance of strengthening orientation programs aligns with 21st-century education principles, which emphasize joyful learning, collaboration, and experiential approaches. Orientation activities grounded in these principles can foster a sense of ownership, create a positive school culture, and encourage students to participate actively in the learning process (Hudson, Hudson, & Miller, 2004). These conditions are essential to building a learning environment that supports students' academic success.

Based on the background above, this study aims to explore the influence of school orientation programs on student adaptation and learning abilities in junior high school. By identifying the extent of the program's contribution to these two critical areas, this research is expected to help schools design more inclusive, targeted, and impactful orientation activities for

new students. The study also aims to contribute to the development of education policies that are more responsive to student needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature surrounding school orientation programs highlights their multifaceted role in supporting students during transitional periods. School orientation is more than a ceremonial welcome—it provides foundational experiences that influence student behavior, attitudes, and academic engagement (Akos & Galassi, 2004). For junior high school students, who often experience anxiety and uncertainty during the school transition, orientation programs offer a structured opportunity to become familiar with new routines, physical environments, and social expectations (Hanewald, 2013).

Adaptation is a key psychological and behavioral process that enables students to function effectively in a new learning environment. According to Eccles and Midgley (1989), students' successful adaptation during school transitions depends on the alignment between their developmental needs and the school context. When orientation programs address emotional, social, and academic needs, students are more likely to show a positive adjustment trajectory, which in turn impacts their motivation and classroom behavior.

School-based transitions are known to be particularly impactful during early adolescence—a phase where identity formation and peer relationships intensify (Alspaugh, 1998). The school orientation process provides a platform for initial social bonding, teacher-student interaction, and identity exploration. Research by Zeedyk et al. (2003) emphasized that students who feel socially integrated during the first weeks of school tend to show improved academic performance and school attachment throughout the academic year. Academic outcomes are closely linked to students' perceptions of belonging and their level of comfort within the school environment. In a study by Ryan and Patrick (2001), it was found that students who experienced supportive peer and teacher relationships during transition periods reported higher levels of academic self-efficacy and engagement. This underlines the importance of orientation programs that foster relational safety, inclusiveness, and student voice.

Moreover, orientation activities that incorporate active learning, team-building, and exploratory sessions can enhance students' cognitive engagement and positive academic habits. According to Wills (2014), early exposure to structured learning environments, goal-setting practices, and school expectations during orientation can influence students' study behaviors and attitude toward learning in the long term. There is also evidence suggesting that poor orientation practices can negatively affect students' adaptation and academic outcomes. Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, and Splittgerber (2000) argued that inadequate transitional support may lead to decreased self-confidence, increased absenteeism, and disengagement from school. Schools that neglect the importance of the orientation phase risk alienating students at a time when support is most critical.

Thus, the literature consistently supports the idea that school orientation programs—when implemented with attention to students’ developmental and contextual needs—play a significant role in easing the adaptation process and promoting effective learning outcomes. Such programs must be designed thoughtfully, integrating academic, emotional, and social dimensions to maximize their positive impact on junior high school students.

METHOD OF IMPLEMENTATION

1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. A qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the influence of school orientation programs (MPLS) on student adaptation and learning abilities, as experienced by the students themselves. Descriptive qualitative research allows the researcher to explore perceptions, experiences, and meanings behind social phenomena—in this case, how seventh-grade students interpret and respond to the MPLS activities. The study focuses on gathering detailed narratives and observations rather than numerical data, making it appropriate for capturing the complex process of student adjustment and engagement in learning.

2. Data Source

The primary data sources for this study are seventh-grade students at SMP Methodist Pematangsiantar, North Sumatera, Indonesia. There are six parallel classes in Grade 7 with a total of 174 students, distributed in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1. Total Number of Grade 7 Students at SMP Methodist Pematangsiantar

No	Class	Number of Students
1	7A	20
2	7B	30
3	7C	24
4	7D	36
5	7E	34
6	7F	30
Total		174

These students participated in the MPLS program and were involved in the data collection through observation, interviews, and open-ended questionnaires. The selection of participants ensured the inclusion of students from different academic and social backgrounds to represent a variety of perspectives.

3. Time and Location of Study

The data collection took place during and shortly after the Masa Pengenalan Lingkungan Sekolah (MPLS) program, which was conducted over a three-day period from 14 to 16 July 2025. The research was carried out on-site at SMP Methodist Pematangsiantar, a private junior high school located in Pematangsiantar, North Sumatera, Indonesia. The school provided full access to observe MPLS activities, interact with students, and gather relevant documentation from teachers and school administrators.

4. Phases of Implementation

The study was structured around three main phases corresponding to the stages of the MPLS program:

a. Preparation Phase

In the preparation phase, the researcher coordinated with the school administration to obtain permission, review MPLS materials, and identify the objectives and planned activities of the program. At this stage, observation instruments and interview guides were also developed. The school's official schedule, student guides, and activity plans for MPLS were used as supporting documents.

b. Implementation Phase

During the three-day MPLS period, the researcher conducted direct observations of classroom and outdoor activities, including student interactions, participation, and responses to the program. In addition, short informal interviews and reflective journals were used to record students' real-time impressions and feelings. The activities observed included school tours, introductions to staff, class bonding exercises, motivational sessions, and school value workshops.

c. Evaluation Phase

After the MPLS activities concluded, follow-up data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected students from each class. Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to a broader student sample to capture overall feedback. This phase also included a brief review session with teachers and school coordinators involved in MPLS implementation. The goal was to evaluate how students perceived the effectiveness of MPLS in helping them adapt socially and psychologically and how it influenced their attitude toward learning.

Below are the phases of implementation were conducted.

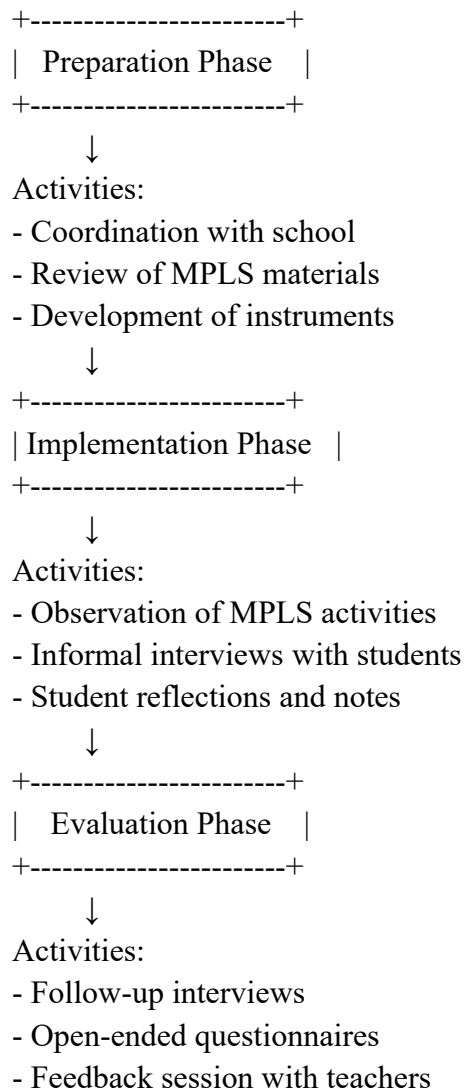


Figure 1. Phases of Implementation of the MPLS Program

RESULTS

1. Preparation Phase

During the preparation phase, the school management and the MPLS committee demonstrated clear planning and coordination. Teachers prepared a detailed activity schedule, assigned student mentors from upper grades, and provided booklets introducing school rules, academic expectations, and core values. Observations revealed that students received introductory letters and MPLS agendas a week prior to the program. From interviews, many students expressed a sense of excitement and curiosity about what to expect. A student from Class 7B said:

"I read the schedule with my parents and felt less nervous because I already knew what would happen on the first day."

This preparation appeared to reduce initial anxiety for many students, especially those coming from smaller elementary schools. The pre-distributed materials were also effective in setting expectations and providing a sense of structure.

2. Implementation Phase

The core MPLS activities took place across three consecutive days and included: morning assemblies, school tours, team-building games, classroom introductions, teacher presentations, and value-sharing sessions.

a) Student Engagement:

Across the classes, student participation was observed to be high. In Class 7C, for example, over 80% of the students actively participated in group discussions and games. Peer bonding began to take place especially during group challenges. One student from Class 7D shared:

"I didn't know anyone at first, but during the team game we had to help each other. Now I already made three friends."

b) Comfort with School Environment:

A majority of students stated that they now knew where key locations were (e.g., library, canteen, restrooms, teachers' room), which made them feel more confident moving around independently.

c) Interaction with Teachers and Seniors:

Interviews revealed that structured introductions to subject teachers and mentoring by senior students had a positive effect on lowering psychological barriers. A student from 7E mentioned:

"I thought the teachers would be strict and scary, but after meeting them in the sessions, I feel more comfortable asking questions in class."



Figure 2. An explanation about the topic for MPLS to participants in the hall

3. Evaluation Phase

After the MPLS program concluded, students were asked to complete a short open-ended questionnaire and participate in semi-structured interviews. Three dominant themes emerged:

a. Improved Adaptation

Many students reported feeling more "at home" in the school environment. The MPLS helped them understand school routines, expectations, and social norms. Several students mentioned that their nervousness had decreased significantly by the end of the second day.

b. Increased Motivation to Learn

Students mentioned that understanding school policies and meeting enthusiastic teachers motivated them to do their best in upcoming lessons. A student from 7A noted:

"I feel excited to start studying here. I think I will like learning science and computer subjects."

c. Suggestions for Improvement

Some students suggested including more hands-on academic activities (e.g., mini workshops or science experiments) during MPLS. A few also requested more time for informal games and interactions to strengthen peer relationships.

Overall, the MPLS program was perceived as beneficial in helping students adapt socially, understand the school system, and build a positive learning attitude. The findings affirm the role of orientation as a transitional support mechanism for junior high school students.



Figure 3. The participants seriously listened to the explanation given

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that the school orientation program (MPLS) plays a crucial role in facilitating the social and academic adaptation of new students entering junior high school. The positive feedback from students, observed engagement during activities, and post-program reflections suggest that the structured implementation of MPLS can significantly ease the transition from elementary to secondary education.

1. Alignment with Literature

The results align closely with previous studies that highlight the importance of school orientation programs. As noted by Hanewald (2013), transitional support is essential during early adolescence to reduce feelings of insecurity and help students develop a sense of belonging. This study supports that conclusion, showing that students who engaged in MPLS activities felt more confident navigating the school environment and establishing early social connections. In the preparation phase, the dissemination of information prior to the program effectively reduced student anxiety—echoing Akos and Galassi's (2004) emphasis on the value of pre-transition communication. Students benefited from knowing what to expect, which allowed them to mentally prepare and begin their school journey with more clarity and confidence.

2. Social and Emotional Adaptation

The MPLS implementation phase provided students with opportunities to form friendships, interact with teachers, and engage with the school community. These social experiences are critical during adolescence, as peer relationships contribute significantly to emotional well-being and school attachment (Zeedyk et al., 2003). The positive student testimonies regarding teamwork and peer bonding suggest that such activities help establish a psychologically safe environment, which is vital for sustained engagement in learning. Furthermore, interaction with teachers and senior students during orientation helped demystify the authority figures in the school. This supports Eccles and Midgley's (1989) theory that a positive stage-environment fit—where the school context supports students' developmental needs—enhances student motivation and participation.

3. Academic Impact and Motivation

The evaluation phase showed an increase in students' motivation and interest in academic subjects. As Ryan and Patrick (2001) argued, early positive relationships and exposure to classroom norms promote academic self-efficacy. The MPLS program, by introducing subject areas and learning goals in an interactive way, helped students visualize themselves as capable learners. This is essential for long-term academic success, especially in the critical adjustment period at the start of junior high school.

4. Areas for Improvement

Despite the overall success, students also expressed a desire for more interactive and academic-themed sessions, such as project-based introductions to school subjects. This aligns with Wills' (2014) recommendation that orientation programs should balance social integration with academic preparation. Future implementations could consider including brief workshops or sample lessons to give students a hands-on feel for the learning process. Additionally, time for unstructured peer interaction could be extended. While structured activities were effective, informal play or reflection time may further strengthen peer bonds, especially for more introverted students.

5. Implications

This study reinforces the importance of thoughtful planning and execution of orientation programs in secondary schools. Particularly in regions where transition challenges are intensified by social or cultural factors, schools must prioritize student-centered approaches. In the case of SMP Methodist Pematangsiantar, the successful outcome of the MPLS program suggests that such interventions can be replicated or adapted in similar school contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of the Masa Pengenalan Lingkungan Sekolah (MPLS) or school orientation program on the adaptation process and learning readiness of seventh-grade students at SMP Methodist Pematangsiantar. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through observation, interviews, and student reflections during the three-day MPLS held in July 2025. The findings indicate that the MPLS program played a significant role in helping students transition smoothly into the junior high school environment. The preparation phase helped reduce anxiety by providing students with information and a clear understanding of what to expect. During the implementation phase, students actively engaged in activities that promoted social bonding, introduced school culture, and familiarized them with teachers and facilities. The evaluation phase revealed that students felt more confident, motivated, and connected to the school community following the program.

These outcomes align with educational research emphasizing the importance of school transition support in fostering student well-being, academic motivation, and social adjustment. Orientation programs like MPLS are not just ceremonial events—they are essential tools for building student resilience and engagement from the very beginning of their school journey. In conclusion, the MPLS program at SMP Methodist Pematangsiantar successfully fulfilled its purpose by helping students adapt emotionally, socially, and academically. Schools should continue to invest in and refine such programs to support students during critical transitions. Future programs might incorporate more hands-on academic exposure and informal peer interactions to enhance the experience further.

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