

Understanding Learning Concepts in Grade 10 Students During Classroom Practices: Case Study BBC Senior High School in Medan

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Abstract

Students' conceptions of learning influence how they interpret academic demands, regulate motivation, select learning strategies, and evaluate educational success; however, limited qualitative evidence explains how these dimensions are interconnected among Indonesian senior high school students. This study aimed to explore Grade 10 students' understanding of learning, identify the internal and external factors influencing their learning, examine the strategies they employed, and determine the indicators through which they evaluated learning success. A descriptive qualitative case-study design was employed at SMA BBC Medan, involving six purposively selected Grade 10 students representing different genders and levels of academic achievement. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews guided by eight open-ended questions and analyzed using the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Member checking and cross-participant comparison were conducted to strengthen the credibility of the findings. The results revealed that students predominantly conceptualized learning as the acquisition of knowledge and experience, while affective, behavioral, and psychomotor dimensions were less frequently recognized. Motivation and personal willingness emerged as the most influential internal factors, whereas family support, conducive learning environments, and engaging teaching practices constituted important external influences. Students relied mainly on conventional strategies, including reading, note-taking, discussion, repeated practice, scheduling, and reviewing materials, but rarely reported metacognitive practices such as goal setting, self-monitoring, reflection, or strategy evaluation. Learning success was primarily associated with improved grades, although some students also identified conceptual understanding, problem-solving ability, confidence, motivation, and behavioral change. The study concludes that students possess a foundational but transitional understanding of learning that remains strongly cognitive, instrumental, and achievement-oriented. These findings imply that teachers and school counselors should collaboratively develop learning guidance that broadens students' conceptions of learning, strengthens autonomous motivation, and explicitly cultivates metacognitive and self-regulated learning skills.

Keywords: Descriptive Qualitative Research; Interviews; Learning Concepts; Mini Research Study; Student Understanding

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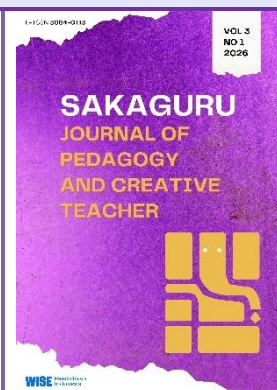
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INTRODUCTION

Learning is a fundamental process through which individuals construct knowledge, develop competencies, reshape attitudes, and transform their ways of understanding themselves and the world. Within educational settings, however, learning is not experienced uniformly because students hold different conceptions regarding what learning means, why it is undertaken, and how its success should be evaluated. Early phenomenographic research distinguished between surface-oriented conceptions, which emphasize memorization, reproduction, and task completion, and deeper conceptions, which view learning as

understanding, interpreting, applying, and transforming knowledge. These conceptions are educationally consequential because they influence how students interpret academic demands, select learning approaches, respond to difficulties, and evaluate their own progress. Students who conceptualize learning primarily as the accumulation of information may prioritize grades and factual recall, whereas those who understand learning as meaning-making are more likely to connect ideas, examine evidence, and apply knowledge across contexts [1], [2], [3].

Students' conceptions of learning are closely associated with the quality of their engagement in classroom activities. Engagement is a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral participation, emotional involvement, cognitive investment, and students' willingness to exercise agency in learning. Merely attending lessons, completing assignments, or complying with teacher instructions does not necessarily indicate meaningful learning because students may participate behaviorally without constructing a coherent understanding of the subject matter. The ICAP framework similarly proposes that learning outcomes become progressively stronger when students move from passive reception to active manipulation, constructive explanation, and interactive knowledge building. Accordingly, activities such as explaining concepts, generating questions, discussing alternative interpretations, and teaching ideas to peers are generally more conducive to conceptual understanding than listening or copying information without cognitive elaboration. Students' beliefs about learning therefore provide an important interpretive foundation for understanding why some students engage deeply while others remain procedurally compliant [4], [5], [6].

Motivation constitutes another essential dimension of students' understanding and enactment of learning. Self-determination theory explains that students are more likely to engage persistently and meaningfully when learning environments support their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Situated expectancy-value theory similarly suggests that students' academic choices, effort, and persistence depend on their expectations of success and the value they attach to a learning activity, including its intrinsic, attainment, and practical value. Thus, students who perceive learning as personally meaningful and relevant to their future are more likely to demonstrate sustained engagement than those who study mainly to avoid punishment, satisfy external demands, or obtain grades. Nevertheless, intrinsic and extrinsic motives should not be treated as a simple dichotomy because students may pursue academic achievement for multiple reasons whose quality and degree of internalization differ. Investigating students' own explanations of their learning goals is therefore necessary to determine whether they perceive learning as a meaningful developmental process or predominantly as an externally regulated school obligation [7], [8], [9].

A comprehensive understanding of learning also involves awareness of the strategies through which learning can be planned, monitored, and improved. Self-regulated learning refers to learners' active management of their cognition, motivation, emotions, behavior, and learning environment in pursuit of academic goals. Effective self-regulated learners establish goals, select suitable cognitive strategies, monitor their understanding, manage time and attention, seek assistance when necessary, and evaluate whether their strategies have produced the intended outcomes. Conventional activities such as reading, note-taking, discussion, and practice can support learning, but their effectiveness depends on how deliberately they are used and whether students understand when, why, and under what conditions particular strategies are appropriate. Metacognitive processes such as self-questioning, reflection, monitoring comprehension, diagnosing errors, and adjusting ineffective approaches are therefore central to the development of autonomous learning. Research further indicates that these capacities do not emerge automatically; they require explicit instruction, guided practice, feedback, and classroom environments that gradually transfer responsibility from teachers to students [10], [11], [12].

Understanding these issues is particularly important during upper-secondary education, when students encounter increasing academic complexity and are expected to assume greater responsibility for their learning. At this developmental stage, students' conceptions are shaped not only by individual cognition but also by classroom assessment, teacher expectations, family support, peer interaction, school culture, and previous academic experiences. Evidence from secondary-school contexts has shown that students may express sophisticated views of ideal learning such as curiosity, understanding, and personal development while simultaneously describing school learning as grade-oriented compliance and task completion. Such discrepancies indicate that students' educational practices may not fully reflect what they consider meaningful learning. Moreover, environments that emphasize performance and external evaluation may reinforce surface orientations, whereas supportive, autonomy-enhancing, and cognitively demanding environments can promote deeper engagement and more self-determined participation [13], [14], [15].

Students' perspectives on learning are also highly relevant to school guidance and counseling. School counselors are positioned to support academic development by helping students clarify learning goals, strengthen motivation, develop self-management skills, address ineffective study behaviors, and cope

with academic difficulties. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that structured school-counseling interventions can contribute to improvements in students' academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional outcomes. However, the relevance of such interventions depends on whether they respond to students' actual beliefs, difficulties, and learning practices rather than relying exclusively on assumptions made by adults. Exploring students' conceptions can therefore provide a needs-based foundation for designing classroom guidance, group counseling, study-skills training, motivational support, and collaborative interventions involving counselors, subject teachers, and families [16], [17], [18].

Despite extensive scholarship on conceptions of learning, student motivation, engagement, and self-regulated learning, several gaps remain. Foundational research on conceptions of learning has predominantly involved university students or secondary students in non-Indonesian educational contexts, limiting the direct transferability of its findings to culturally and institutionally distinct school environments. In addition, motivation, engagement, learning strategies, and academic outcomes are frequently investigated as separate constructs through standardized quantitative measures, providing less insight into how students themselves connect the meaning and purpose of learning with the factors, strategies, and indicators they encounter in everyday classroom practice. Research on school counseling has also established the potential benefits of academic-support interventions but has devoted comparatively less attention to the learner perspectives needed to develop context-sensitive guidance programs. Addressing these limitations, the present study aims to explore how Grade 10 students at SMA BBC Medan conceptualize learning, identify the internal and external factors they perceive as influencing learning success, examine the strategies they use in their daily academic activities, and determine the indicators through which they evaluate successful learning. By foregrounding students' voices, this study is expected to provide a contextualized basis for developing more meaningful learning practices and responsive school guidance and counseling services [19], [20], [21].

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative case-study design to explore Grade 10 students' understanding of learning within the bounded context of classroom practices at SMA BBC Medan. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to interpret how students construct the meaning, purposes, processes, and outcomes of learning based on their personal academic experiences rather than quantify relationships among predetermined variables. The case-study orientation enabled an in-depth examination of participants' perspectives within a specific institutional and educational context, while the descriptive component facilitated the systematic presentation of similarities and variations in students' accounts. The study particularly focused on students' conceptions of learning, perceived indicators of successful learning, internal and external factors affecting their academic activities, and the strategies they used to regulate their learning. This design is consistent with the principles of qualitative inquiry, which emphasize contextual interpretation, participants' lived meanings, and the investigation of complex educational phenomena in natural settings [22], [23], [24].

Population and Sample

The population of interest comprised Grade 10 students enrolled at SMA BBC Medan. From this population, six students were selected using purposive sampling because they were expected to provide information relevant to the study objectives. The sample consisted of three male and three female students representing different levels of academic achievement, categorized by the school as high, moderate, and low achievement. This variation was incorporated to capture diverse perspectives and reduce the likelihood that the findings would represent only one category of student experience. The selection strategy was not intended to produce statistical representativeness; instead, it aimed to obtain information-rich cases capable of illustrating how students with different academic profiles conceptualized and practiced learning. In qualitative inquiry, sample adequacy is determined primarily by the relevance, specificity, and depth of the information generated rather than by numerical size alone. Nevertheless, the small number of participants limits the transferability of the findings and requires the conclusions to be interpreted within the specific context of SMA BBC Medan [25], [26].

Location and Timing

The study was conducted at SMA BBC Medan, a senior high school located in Medan, Indonesia, in February 2026. The school constituted the bounded setting of the case because the research focused specifically on Grade 10 students' understanding of learning as experienced through their daily classroom practices. Conducting the investigation in the participants' actual educational environment enabled the researchers

to interpret their responses in relation to the academic expectations, classroom routines, peer interactions, and instructional experiences encountered at the school. The timing of the study was also relevant because Grade 10 represents a transitional stage in which students adapt to the academic demands of senior high school and are increasingly expected to develop independent learning habits, goal orientation, and more deliberate learning strategies. The contextual boundaries of place, participant group, and period were clearly defined to maintain coherence between the research questions, data collection process, and interpretation of the findings [23], [24], [27].

Research Procedure and Instruments

The research procedure consisted of four interrelated stages. The first stage involved defining the research focus and translating the research questions into key domains of inquiry. The second stage involved selecting participants according to the predetermined criteria of grade level, gender representation, and variation in academic achievement. The third stage comprised individual semi-structured interviews, while the fourth stage involved organizing, analyzing, verifying, and interpreting the resulting textual data.

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide containing eight open-ended questions. The questions addressed students' definitions of learning, indicators that learning had occurred, examples of learning activities, factors affecting learning, purposes of learning, conditions supporting learning success, strategies considered effective, and indicators used to evaluate successful learning. The semi-structured format provided consistency across interviews while allowing the researchers to ask follow-up questions and clarify responses when students offered brief, ambiguous, or experience-based explanations. This flexibility was important because students could interpret terms such as learning success, motivation, and effective strategy differently according to their academic experiences.

The interview questions were organized to move from relatively concrete descriptions toward more reflective explanations. Students were first asked to describe what learning meant and identify common learning activities before discussing influencing factors, learning goals, strategic behaviors, and indicators of achievement. Such sequencing was intended to help participants articulate their experiences progressively and reduce the possibility that abstract questions would produce superficial responses. The resulting interview data were subsequently organized according to participant and question domain to facilitate cross-case comparison. In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are particularly useful for examining participants' subjective meanings while maintaining alignment with a common analytical focus [28], [29], [30].

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification [31]. Data condensation began with repeated examination of the interview material to identify statements relevant to the research questions. Irrelevant or repetitive information was reduced, while meaningful units were coded according to their substantive content. Initial codes included, among others, knowledge acquisition, behavioral change, academic achievement, intrinsic motivation, family support, classroom environment, reading, note-taking, discussion, practice, study scheduling, self-confidence, and future preparation.

The codes were then compared and grouped into broader analytical categories corresponding to the study focus: conceptions of learning, indicators that learning had occurred, learning goals, internal and external influencing factors, learning strategies, and indicators of learning success. Both deductive and inductive reasoning informed this process. Deductive analysis was guided by the research questions and interview domains, whereas inductive analysis allowed additional meanings and patterns to emerge from students' responses. Data display was conducted through structured narrative descriptions and a cross-participant matrix showing convergent and divergent responses. The matrix enabled comparison across gender and academic-achievement categories without treating these characteristics as variables for statistical analysis.

Conclusion drawing involved interpreting the recurring patterns, relationships, and differences identified across the six participants. Preliminary interpretations were continually compared with the original interview data to ensure that the conclusions remained grounded in students' accounts. Analytical credibility was strengthened through member checking, whereby interpretations were reconfirmed with participants, and source comparison, whereby responses from different students were examined for consistency, variation, and contradictory evidence. Particular attention was given to negative or divergent cases so that the analysis did not merely emphasize dominant responses. These procedures are consistent with established recommendations for transparent and trustworthy qualitative analysis [32], [33], [34].

Impact Evaluation

Because this study did not implement an experimental intervention, impact evaluation was not intended to estimate causal effects on academic achievement. Instead, the evaluation was interpretive and focused on identifying the educational implications of students' conceptions, motivations, and learning strategies. The potential impact of students' understanding was examined across four domains: conceptual, motivational, strategic, and practical. The conceptual domain concerned whether students understood learning primarily as knowledge acquisition or as a broader process involving cognitive, affective, behavioral, and skill development. The motivational domain examined whether students' learning orientations were predominantly intrinsic, extrinsic, or a combination of both. The strategic domain focused on the extent to which students reported conventional, collaborative, independent, or metacognitive learning practices. The practical domain addressed the relevance of the findings for classroom instruction and school guidance and counseling services.

Interpretations of impact were generated by examining recurring relationships among participants' conceptions of learning, their stated goals, the factors they considered influential, and the strategies they reported using. For example, an emphasis on grades was interpreted in relation to extrinsic goal orientation, while the absence of self-monitoring and reflective strategies was considered indicative of limited metacognitive awareness. Conversely, the ability to explain material, solve problems, and identify behavioral change was interpreted as evidence of a more comprehensive conception of successful learning. The evaluation therefore provided a contextual basis for identifying areas requiring educational support, particularly the development of intrinsic motivation, metacognitive strategies, learner autonomy, and collaboration between subject teachers and school counselors. The findings were interpreted as context-specific insights rather than generalizable measurements of intervention effectiveness.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Result

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews identified five interrelated themes: students' conceptions of learning, perceived indicators and purposes of learning, internal and external influences on learning, learning strategies, and indicators of learning success. Table 1 provides a cross-thematic synthesis of the interview findings, while the subsequent subsections explain the patterns and variations identified across the six participants. The findings are descriptive and context-specific; therefore, numerical frequencies are used only to clarify the distribution of responses rather than to support statistical generalization. The original interview data indicate that students commonly associated learning with acquiring knowledge and experience, identified motivation as a central influence, and relied mainly on conventional learning strategies.

Table 1. Summary and Interpretation of Interview Findings

No.	Analytical Theme	Summary of Participants' Responses	Interpretive Meaning
1	Conceptions of learning	Most participants defined learning as acquiring new knowledge, understanding information, and gaining experience. One participant described learning as a broader process of behavioral change.	Students' conceptions were predominantly cognitive and acquisition-oriented, although an emerging holistic conception was also evident.
2	Indicators that learning has occurred	Students referred to increased knowledge, improved skills, the ability to explain material, and the ability to answer questions or solve problems.	Learning was recognized mainly through observable cognitive performance and knowledge reproduction.
3	Learning activities	Frequently mentioned activities included reading, listening to teachers, taking notes, discussing with peers, completing exercises, and reviewing lessons.	Students recognized both individual and socially mediated learning activities but rarely identified digital or metacognitive practices.
4	Factors influencing learning	Internal factors included motivation, willingness, concentration, and discipline. External factors included family support, a conducive environment, and teachers' instructional approaches.	Learning was perceived as the product of interaction between personal agency and environmental support.
5	Purposes of learning	Students commonly associated learning with acquiring knowledge, improving skills, obtaining good grades, preparing for the future, and securing employment. One participant emphasized personal satisfaction and understanding the world.	Students' purposes were largely instrumental and extrinsically oriented, with limited evidence of intrinsic and meaning-oriented goals.
6	Learning strategies	Students reported reading textbooks, taking notes, participating in discussions, completing practice exercises, creating study schedules, and reviewing material.	Students had developed practical study routines, but explicit planning, monitoring, self-evaluation, and strategy adjustment were not prominently reported.

No.	Analytical Theme	Summary of Participants' Responses	Interpretive Meaning
7	Indicators of learning success	Most students emphasized improved grades, while others mentioned explaining concepts, solving problems, increased confidence, stronger motivation, and positive behavioral change.	Academic achievement remained the dominant criterion, although some students demonstrated a broader understanding of cognitive, affective, and behavioral development.

Students' Conceptions of Learning

Five of the six participants primarily described learning as a process of acquiring new knowledge or obtaining information that had not previously been understood. Their responses commonly emphasized activities such as receiving explanations, reading instructional material, practicing questions, and developing an understanding of subject content. Several participants also connected learning with experience, indicating that knowledge could be developed not only through formal instruction but also through participation and practice. However, only one participant articulated a more comprehensive conception by describing learning as a process that produces changes in behavior.

This pattern indicates that students' understanding was dominated by the cognitive dimension of learning. They were generally able to recognize that learning involves a transition from not knowing to knowing, but they less frequently identified changes in attitudes, values, dispositions, or practical competencies. The limited acknowledgement of affective and behavioral transformation suggests that learning was commonly perceived as an academic activity rather than a multidimensional process of personal development. Nevertheless, the participant who referred to behavioral change provided evidence that a broader conception of learning was present, although it was not shared consistently across the group. These findings reflect the original data showing that five participants emphasized knowledge acquisition and only one explicitly recognized comprehensive behavioral change.

Perceived Indicators and Purposes of Learning

Participants identified several indicators that demonstrated whether learning had occurred. The most frequent indicator was a change in knowledge, particularly the ability to understand material that had previously been unfamiliar. Some students also considered the ability to explain a concept to another person or correctly complete practice exercises as evidence of successful learning. These responses demonstrate that students did not evaluate learning exclusively through exposure to instructional activities; they also recognized the importance of demonstrating understanding through explanation and problem-solving.

Despite this emerging emphasis on application, students' indicators remained primarily focused on knowledge reproduction and academic task performance. Higher-order outcomes, including evaluating evidence, generating original ideas, transferring knowledge to unfamiliar contexts, and critically reflecting on one's understanding, were not explicitly mentioned. The findings therefore indicate that participants had begun to distinguish between merely participating in a lesson and actually understanding its content, but their criteria for judging learning were not yet fully developed.

Students' stated purposes for learning showed a similarly mixed pattern. Most participants reported that learning was intended to increase knowledge and improve skills. Two participants extended this explanation by linking learning to preparation for the future and access to employment. Only one participant articulated a clearly intrinsic orientation, describing learning as a source of personal satisfaction and a means of understanding the world. Thus, although students appreciated the developmental value of knowledge and competence, their learning goals were predominantly associated with external outcomes, future utility, and academic achievement.

Internal and External Factors Influencing Learning

Motivation and personal willingness emerged as the most frequently reported internal factors influencing learning. Participants believed that students were more likely to understand lessons when they possessed a strong desire to learn, maintained concentration, and demonstrated discipline. Their responses suggest an awareness that effective learning requires active personal involvement rather than mere physical attendance in the classroom. Focus and orderly study habits were also regarded as conditions that could improve the quality of the learning process.

Participants simultaneously acknowledged that learning was influenced by external conditions. Family support, a quiet and conducive home environment, teachers' engaging instructional practices, and positive classroom conditions were repeatedly identified as important. These findings demonstrate that students did not attribute academic success entirely to individual ability. Instead, they understood learning as occurring through an interaction between internal motivation and environmental support. The participants' responses also indicate that teachers and families can either facilitate or constrain learning by influencing students' emotional readiness, access to assistance, and capacity to maintain concentration.

Learning Activities and Strategies

Participants described a relatively diverse set of conventional learning activities. These included reading textbooks, listening to teachers' explanations, taking notes, summarizing material, discussing lessons with classmates, and completing practice questions. The inclusion of discussion suggests that students recognized learning as both an individual and social process. Peer interaction was perceived as useful for clarifying difficult material, exchanging information, and strengthening understanding.

The strategies reported by participants included establishing regular study schedules, reviewing previously studied material, practicing questions repeatedly, and discussing content with peers. Some participants also reported reviewing material before sleeping as a means of strengthening memory. These practices indicate an initial awareness that learning effectiveness depends on repeated and organized engagement rather than on a single exposure to instructional content.

However, the interviews did not reveal explicit use of metacognitive strategies. Participants did not describe setting specific learning goals, assessing their prior understanding, monitoring comprehension while studying, identifying causes of errors, evaluating the effectiveness of selected strategies, or replacing ineffective strategies. Digital learning practices were also absent from their responses, despite the increasing integration of digital resources into secondary education. The findings therefore show that students possessed practical study routines but had not yet articulated a systematic process for regulating and evaluating their own learning.

Indicators of Learning Success

Improved grades constituted the most frequently reported indicator of learning success. Participants commonly interpreted higher examination or assignment scores as evidence that learning had been effective. This emphasis reflects the central role of formal assessment in shaping students' perceptions of academic achievement. Nevertheless, students also identified several non-grade-based indicators, including the ability to explain material, solve problems correctly, and apply knowledge in learning tasks.

Some responses extended beyond cognitive performance. Participants mentioned positive changes in attitudes and behavior, while two students referred to increased self-confidence and stronger motivation as signs of successful learning. These responses demonstrate that at least some students recognized affective and behavioral development as part of learning success. Accordingly, the participants' conceptions cannot be classified as exclusively grade-oriented. Rather, the findings reveal a continuum ranging from a narrow emphasis on scores to a more comprehensive understanding involving knowledge, skills, confidence, motivation, and behavioral transformation.

Discussions

The findings indicate that Grade 10 students at SMA BBC Medan predominantly conceptualized learning as the acquisition of new knowledge, information, and experience. Although several participants associated learning with understanding and practical application, only one explicitly described it as a comprehensive change in behavior. This pattern suggests that students' conceptions remain largely cognitive and accumulative rather than transformative, affective, or psychomotor. The finding is consistent with Hadar [35], who found that secondary school students frequently differentiated between ideal learning as personal understanding and school learning as the completion of academic tasks. It also supports Brown et al. [36], who demonstrated that secondary students hold qualitatively different conceptions of learning, ranging from the accumulation of information to personal change and the development of new perspectives. However, the present study extends these findings by showing that acquisition-oriented and transformative conceptions may coexist within a small group of students in the same school context. Students who emphasized explanation, problem-solving, and behavioral change appeared to possess a more sophisticated understanding than those who associated learning primarily with receiving and remembering information.

The predominance of cognitive conceptions may be related to the instructional and assessment practices experienced by students. When classroom learning prioritizes content coverage, note-taking, correct answers, and examination performance, students may gradually interpret learning as the reproduction of teacher-provided information. By contrast, learning environments that require students to explain concepts, connect ideas, investigate problems, and reflect on their understanding are more likely to facilitate meaning-oriented conceptions. Hattie and Donoghue [37] emphasized that the effectiveness of learning strategies depends on the phase and purpose of learning, with deeper strategies becoming particularly important when learners are expected to consolidate and transfer knowledge. The present findings therefore suggest that students' relatively narrow conceptions should not be interpreted solely as individual cognitive limitations; they may also reflect the learning opportunities and evaluative expectations provided by the school. This interpretation reinforces the argument that students' beliefs

about learning develop through their interaction with instructional practices and classroom environments rather than functioning as fixed personal attributes.

Motivation and personal willingness emerged as the most influential internal factors in students' learning. This finding is consistent with self-determination theory, which explains that the quality of students' engagement depends on whether their behavior is autonomously motivated or controlled by external demands. Ryan and Deci [38], distinguish intrinsic motivation, which arises from interest and satisfaction, from different forms of extrinsic motivation that vary in their level of internalization. In the present study, most students associated learning with obtaining good grades, acquiring skills, preparing for future education, or securing employment, while only one participant emphasized personal satisfaction and understanding the world. These responses indicate a predominantly instrumental and extrinsic orientation. Nevertheless, such an orientation should not automatically be regarded as undesirable. Preparing for a career or improving academic performance can support persistent learning when students personally value these outcomes. The more important issue is whether the goals are meaningfully internalized or experienced merely as external pressures.

The findings also support situated expectancy-value theory, which proposes that students' choices, effort, and persistence are influenced by their expectations of success, the value assigned to a task, and the perceived costs of participation. Eccles and Wigfield [39], argue that motivation is shaped by the immediate learning situation as well as by broader developmental, social, and cultural experiences. In this study, students' emphasis on future preparation demonstrates the perceived utility value of learning, whereas their limited references to curiosity and enjoyment indicate that intrinsic value was less salient. This differs from an ideal form of autonomous learning in which students participate not only because learning is useful but also because it is intellectually meaningful. The finding implies that teachers and school counselors need to help students connect school subjects with personal interests, everyday experiences, future identities, and authentic social problems. Such connections may broaden their motivation from grade-oriented compliance toward sustained, personally meaningful engagement.

Students did not attribute learning success exclusively to personal motivation. They also identified family support, a conducive learning environment, peer interaction, and engaging instructional methods as important external influences. This finding is consistent with Fredricks et al. [40], who conceptualized student engagement as a multidimensional process shaped by behavioral participation, emotional experiences, cognitive investment, and contextual support. The participants' responses demonstrate that motivation operates within an educational ecology: concentration and willingness may be personal characteristics, but they can be strengthened or weakened by the quality of teaching, family encouragement, and environmental conditions. The finding challenges explanations that position academic difficulties solely as evidence of students' limited effort. In some cases, reduced engagement may result from instructional monotony, inadequate academic support, distracting environments, or the absence of meaningful learning opportunities. Therefore, interventions designed to improve learning should simultaneously address students' personal regulation and the environmental conditions in which learning occurs.

Regarding learning strategies, the participants reported reading, note-taking, classroom listening, peer discussion, repeated practice, study scheduling, and reviewing instructional material. These activities demonstrate that students had developed several practical routines to support academic performance. However, the interview responses did not reveal explicit metacognitive practices such as setting specific goals, monitoring comprehension, diagnosing errors, evaluating strategy effectiveness, or modifying unsuccessful approaches. This finding is consistent with Panadero's [41] review, which positions self-regulated learning as a cyclical process involving planning, performance monitoring, reflection, and strategic adaptation. The reported strategies in the present study were primarily task-oriented rather than regulation-oriented. Students appeared to know what activities they commonly performed but were less able to explain how they determined whether those activities were effective.

The metacognitive gap identified in this study also corresponds with the findings of Dignath and Veenman [42], who showed that self-regulated learning can be supported through direct strategy instruction and indirectly through classroom environments that give students opportunities to regulate their learning. Their review emphasizes that providing students with academic tasks is insufficient unless teachers explicitly model how to plan, monitor, and evaluate the learning process. Similarly, Hattie and Donoghue [37], argue that successful strategy use requires students to understand which strategies are appropriate for particular phases and learning objectives. The present study adds a student-perspective dimension to these arguments: students reported familiar study techniques but did not spontaneously discuss the conditional knowledge required to select and adapt those techniques. This finding suggests that teachers and counselors should move beyond general recommendations such as "study regularly" or "read more" and explicitly teach students how to identify learning goals, test their understanding, recognize misconceptions, seek appropriate assistance, and evaluate their progress.

Another important finding concerns students' indicators of learning success. Improved grades were the most frequently cited indicator, demonstrating the central position of formal assessment in students' academic experiences. Nevertheless, some participants referred to the ability to explain material, solve problems, develop self-confidence, increase motivation, and demonstrate positive behavioral change. The findings therefore reveal a continuum between performance-oriented and development-oriented interpretations of success. This pattern is comparable to research on students' conceptions of assessment, which indicates that secondary students often regard grades as summaries of achievement while also recognizing assessment as a mechanism for motivating and improving learning. The present study similarly shows that students' evaluation of success is not exclusively score-based, although grades remain the most visible and dominant criterion.

The broader indicators identified by some participants are consistent with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's model of formative assessment, which emphasizes that feedback should help students understand standards, evaluate their current performance, and take greater control of subsequent learning. Students who can explain concepts, identify errors, and recognize personal improvement demonstrate more meaningful evidence of learning than students who rely solely on final scores. However, the limited references to self-assessment in the interviews indicate that participants may not yet consistently use assessment information to regulate their learning. Schools should therefore provide formative feedback that highlights not only correctness but also progress, reasoning quality, strategy use, and areas for further development. Reflective journals, self-assessment rubrics, peer feedback, and opportunities to revise work could help students reinterpret assessment as an ongoing source of learning information rather than merely a final judgment.

The findings have direct implications for guidance and counseling services. The participants required support not only in addressing academic difficulties but also in broadening their conceptions of learning, strengthening autonomous motivation, and developing metacognitive regulation. This interpretation is supported by Whiston et al. [43], whose meta-analysis demonstrated that school-counseling interventions can positively affect students' educational and behavioral outcomes. It also aligns with Villares et al. [44], who examined the contribution of the Student Success Skills program to academic achievement. However, the present study suggests that academic guidance should not be reduced to generic time-management or test-preparation advice. Counseling services need to incorporate meaningful goal setting, motivation internalization, learning-strategy selection, emotional regulation, help-seeking, self-monitoring, and reflective evaluation. Collaboration between counselors and subject teachers is essential because strategic learning must be practiced within authentic disciplinary tasks rather than taught only as an isolated counseling topic.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated exploration of how secondary-school students connect the meaning of learning with its purposes, influencing factors, strategies, and perceived indicators of success within one qualitative framework. Previous studies have commonly examined conceptions of learning, motivation, engagement, self-regulation, assessment, or counseling interventions as separate constructs. By foregrounding students' own accounts, the present study reveals an interconnected pattern: an acquisition-oriented conception of learning was accompanied by predominantly extrinsic goals, reliance on conventional study routines, limited metacognitive awareness, and a strong emphasis on grades. At the same time, references to explanation, problem-solving, confidence, personal satisfaction, and behavioral change showed that more transformative understandings had begun to emerge. This coexistence constitutes an important contextual contribution because it positions students not as exclusively surface or deep learners but as learners whose conceptions remain transitional and internally diverse. The focus on Grade 10 students in an Indonesian school context also provides context-specific evidence from a population that remains less represented than university students in the literature on conceptions of learning.

Theoretically, the study strengthens the connection between students' conceptions of learning, motivation, self-regulation, and assessment orientation. It demonstrates that these dimensions should not be treated as isolated characteristics because students' definitions of learning influence why they learn, the strategies they consider appropriate, and the criteria they use to judge success. Practically, the findings imply that teachers should design learning activities that require explanation, application, inquiry, collaboration, and reflection rather than relying excessively on information transmission and factual reproduction. Formative assessment should provide opportunities for revision and self-evaluation, while guidance and counseling programs should explicitly address intrinsic motivation, meaningful academic goals, metacognitive strategies, and learner autonomy. At the institutional level, the school should facilitate collaboration among counselors, subject teachers, homeroom teachers, and families to create a learning environment that supports both academic achievement and students' broader personal development.

The findings should nevertheless be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study involved only six purposively selected students from a single school, which enabled in-depth exploration

but restricted the transferability of the findings to other schools, regions, and student populations. Second, the data were generated exclusively through semi-structured interviews and therefore reflected students' reported perceptions rather than directly observed learning behavior. Students may have provided socially desirable responses or may not have been fully aware of the strategies they used. Third, the study did not include classroom observations, learning diaries, assessment records, teacher perspectives, counselor perspectives, or parental accounts that could have strengthened methodological triangulation. Fourth, although participants represented different academic-achievement levels and genders, the small sample did not permit systematic comparison across these characteristics. Fifth, the study captured students' perspectives at one point in time and could not determine how conceptions, motivation, and strategies changed across semesters or in response to specific interventions. Future research should employ multisource and longitudinal designs, involve more diverse school settings, and combine interviews with observations, reflective journals, achievement data, and intervention-based evaluation to examine how students' conceptions of learning develop and how targeted instructional or counseling programs contribute to that development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Grade 10 students at SMA BBC Medan possess a foundational yet uneven understanding of learning, which is still predominantly framed as the acquisition of knowledge, information, and academic experience rather than as a multidimensional process involving cognitive, affective, behavioral, and psychomotor development. Students identified motivation, personal willingness, family support, conducive learning environments, and engaging teaching practices as important determinants of learning success, indicating that learning is perceived as the result of interaction between individual agency and contextual support. Their learning goals were largely instrumental and externally oriented toward grades, future education, and employment, although emerging intrinsic orientations were also evident in students who associated learning with personal satisfaction and a deeper understanding of the world. The participants employed several conventional strategies, including reading, note-taking, peer discussion, repeated practice, scheduling, and reviewing materials; however, their limited reference to goal setting, self-monitoring, reflection, and strategy evaluation demonstrates an important metacognitive gap. Learning success was primarily evaluated through improved grades, but some students also recognized conceptual understanding, problem-solving ability, confidence, motivation, and behavioral change as meaningful outcomes. These findings highlight the need for instructional and counseling practices that broaden students' conceptions of learning, strengthen autonomous motivation, and explicitly develop self-regulated and metacognitive learning skills. The study contributes context-specific evidence by integrating students' conceptions, motivations, strategies, influencing factors, and indicators of success within a single qualitative framework. Nevertheless, because the research involved only six participants from one school and relied mainly on self-reported interview data, the findings should be interpreted as contextual rather than broadly generalizable. Future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples, incorporate classroom observations and multiple informants, and evaluate the effectiveness of targeted instructional and school-counseling interventions in developing more meaningful, autonomous, and reflective learning practices.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the investigation involved only six purposively selected Grade 10 students from a single senior high school, which allowed for in-depth exploration but substantially limited the transferability of the results to students from other schools, regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, or educational systems. Second, the study relied primarily on semi-structured interview data; therefore, the findings represent participants' reported perceptions and may not fully correspond to their actual learning behaviors in classroom or independent-study settings. The absence of complementary data sources, such as classroom observations, learning journals, academic records, teacher and counselor interviews, or parental perspectives, also restricted the depth of methodological triangulation. Third, the cross-sectional design captured students' views at only one point in time and could not explain how their conceptions of learning, motivation, or learning strategies might change across grade levels, semesters, or after specific instructional and counseling interventions. Fourth, the researchers' interpretive role in coding and categorizing the interview data may have introduced analytical subjectivity, despite the use of member checking and cross-participant comparison to strengthen credibility. Finally, because the study was descriptive and did not implement an intervention or measure learning outcomes directly, no causal conclusions can be drawn regarding the relationships among students' conceptions of learning, motivation, strategy use, and academic achievement. Future research should therefore employ larger and more diverse samples,

longitudinal or comparative designs, multiple data sources, and intervention-based approaches to provide a more comprehensive and empirically robust understanding of students' learning conceptions and their educational consequences.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

BSR contributed to the conceptualization of the study, research design, data collection, initial data analysis, and preparation of the original manuscript. CS participated in instrument development, participant coordination, data interpretation, and manuscript revision. ERP contributed to the literature review, qualitative data organization, validation of the findings, and refinement of the discussion. MIM supported the research procedure, data verification, reference management, and critical review of the manuscript. All authors discussed the findings, reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript, and agreed to be accountable for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

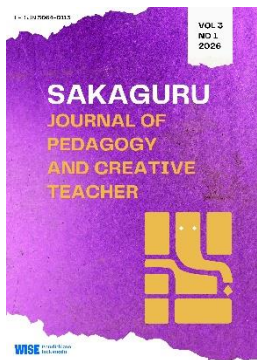
During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI, solely to support English-language refinement, improve grammatical accuracy, enhance academic clarity, and assist with the organization of selected sections of the manuscript. The AI tool was not used to generate research data, select participants, conduct interviews, perform qualitative coding, determine analytical themes, interpret the findings, or formulate the study's substantive conclusions. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed, verified, revised, and approved by the authors to ensure its accuracy, originality, contextual appropriateness, and consistency with the empirical evidence. The authors assume full responsibility for the scientific integrity, interpretations, arguments, and final content of the manuscript, and the AI tool is not recognized as an author or contributor.

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Understanding Learning Concepts in Grade 10 Students During Classroom Practices: Case Study BBC Senior High School in Medan

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