



## Principal Leadership in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum: An Interdisciplinary Case Study in Indonesian Primary Education

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*Article History: Received: July, 10<sup>th</sup> 2025; Accepted: August, 27<sup>st</sup> 2025; Published: August, 31<sup>th</sup> 2025*

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of school principal leadership in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at a public primary school in Indonesia using an interdisciplinary qualitative approach. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through structured interviews, observations, and document analysis at SDN 1 Sidorejo, a school that has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum at the independent sharing stage. The findings indicate that effective curriculum implementation is strongly influenced by the principal's ability to integrate managerial, supervisory, and instructional leadership roles. As a manager, the principal optimized limited resources and prioritized teacher development to support curriculum demands. Through academic supervision, the principal monitored instructional practices and provided feedback that contributed to gradual improvements in teaching quality. In addition, instructional leadership was reflected in efforts to foster teacher collaboration, encourage pedagogical innovation, and build a supportive learning culture. Despite positive outcomes, challenges were identified, including varying levels of teacher readiness, resistance to change, and limited access to technological resources. The study concludes that successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires sustained and adaptive school leadership capable of managing organizational change while supporting teachers' professional growth. These findings contribute to the international literature on school leadership and curriculum reform, particularly in the context of primary education in resource-constrained settings.

**Keywords:** *principal leadership; merdeka curriculum; curriculum implementation; primary education; educational management*



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## INTRODUCTION

Curriculum reform is a complex phenomenon that extends beyond pedagogical considerations to encompass dimensions of educational management, organizational leadership, and institutional change at the school level. International literature conceptualizes curriculum implementation as a systemic change process that requires alignment between policy frameworks, school organizational capacity, and instructional leadership practices (Fullan, 2016; Hallinger, 2018).

In the context of Indonesian basic education, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the post-COVID-19 period represents a strategic response to learning recovery efforts, emphasizing flexibility, differentiated instruction, and the strengthening of essential student competencies. This adaptive curriculum orientation aligns with global trends promoting school autonomy and context-responsive learning (OECD, 2021; Priestley et al., 2021). However, empirical evidence consistently indicates that increased school autonomy does not automatically translate into improved learning outcomes unless supported by effective school leadership and well-managed change processes (Harris & Jones, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2020).

From an educational management perspective, schools are viewed as learning organizations that require integrated management of human resources, infrastructure, and organizational culture to sustain pedagogical innovation (Bush, 2019). Simultaneously, within the educational leadership discourse, principals are recognized as key instructional leaders responsible for articulating a shared learning vision, facilitating teachers' professional development, and ensuring consistent curriculum enactment in classroom practices (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Robinson et al., 2017).

Cross-national studies over the past decade further highlight that the success of curriculum reform is strongly influenced by principals' capacity to lead change, particularly in fostering teacher commitment, managing resistance, and creating a school climate conducive to pedagogical experimentation (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2020). In the absence of strong and supportive leadership, curriculum reform initiatives risk remaining at an administrative level with limited impact on students' learning experiences (Day et al., 2016).

At the primary school level, the challenges of curriculum implementation are intensified by the demands of thematic and cross-disciplinary learning, limited resources, and varying levels of teacher readiness to adopt project-based learning and authentic assessment approaches (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). These conditions require principals to assume multiple roles not only as organizational managers but also as academic supervisors and instructional leaders who bridge curriculum policy and classroom realities (Gumus et al., 2018).

Preliminary findings based on interviews with the principal of SDN 1 Sidorejo indicate that the school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum at the *independent sharing* stage. Nevertheless, several challenges persist, including limited opportunities for intensive teacher training, high administrative workloads, and disparities in teachers' readiness to adapt flexible and contextualized learning practices. These findings are consistent with international research emphasizing that teacher preparedness and school leadership support are critical determinants of successful autonomy-based curriculum implementation (Priestley et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020).



Although scholarly discussions on the Merdeka Curriculum and school leadership have begun to emerge, research that explicitly examines the role of principals in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum through an interdisciplinary lens integrating educational leadership, school management, and instructional practice perspectives remains limited, particularly within the context of primary schools in regional settings. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the principal's role as a manager, supervisor, and leader in managing resources, the school environment, and instructional processes to support the effective and sustainable implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the role of the school principal in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative descriptive approach was selected because it enables the systematic description and interpretation of social phenomena based on participants' perspectives and contextual experiences (Silalahi, 2009). The study did not aim to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships but focused on providing an in-depth understanding of leadership practices and curriculum implementation at the school level.

### **Research Context and Site**

The research was conducted at SDN 1 Sidorejo, a public primary school located in Sumberejo District, Tanggamus Regency, Lampung Province, Indonesia. The site was purposively selected because the school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum at the *independent sharing* stage, making it a relevant context for examining the principal's leadership role in curriculum implementation.

### **Participants and Data Sources**

Data were obtained from primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of verbal data collected through interviews with predetermined informants, particularly the school principal, who played a central role in planning, supervising, and managing curriculum implementation. Secondary data included school documents and relevant previous studies that supported contextual understanding and data triangulation.

### **Research Instrument**

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary research instrument. Therefore, the researcher's readiness and competence are critical to ensuring data quality. Instrument validation was conducted through self-evaluation of the researcher's understanding of qualitative research methods, mastery of theoretical perspectives related to educational leadership and curriculum studies, and readiness to engage with the research setting (Sugiyono, 2019).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

#### **Observation**

Observation was conducted systematically to document leadership practices, school management activities, and instructional supervision related to the



implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This technique allowed the researcher to capture naturally occurring phenomena within the school environment (Abdussamad, 2021).

### **Interview**

Interviews were conducted using a structured interview format, in which a detailed interview guide was prepared in advance. This approach ensured that the data collected remained focused on the research objectives and avoided overly broad or irrelevant discussions (Sugiyono, 2019). Establishing rapport with the informant was prioritized to encourage openness and accuracy in responses.

### **Data Credibility and Trustworthiness**

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, several strategies were applied:

- Prolonged engagement, in which the researcher remained in the field until data saturation was achieved, allowing for repeated verification of information.
- Source triangulation, by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and relevant documents.
- Use of appropriate references, whereby empirical findings were supported and interpreted using relevant theoretical and empirical literature to enhance credibility (Yusuf, 2017).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2019). Data reduction involved organizing, selecting, and simplifying raw data obtained from interviews and observations. Data display was conducted through structured narrative descriptions to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring patterns and themes related to the principal's role in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **School Profile and Context of Curriculum Implementation**

SDN 1 Sidorejo is a public primary school located in Sidorejo Village, Sumberejo District, Tanggamus Regency, Lampung Province, Indonesia. Established in 1978, the school is currently accredited at level B and serves 212 students supported by 12 teachers. The school has basic educational facilities, including classrooms, a library, a teachers' room, sanitation facilities, and a storage room. At the time of the study, SDN 1 Sidorejo had implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and reached the *independent sharing stage*, indicating a relatively advanced level of curriculum adoption.

This contextual background is important because previous studies emphasize that school capacity, including human resources and infrastructure, plays a significant role in determining the effectiveness of curriculum implementation (Bush, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Despite resource limitations typical of regional primary schools,



SDN 1 Sidorejo represents a relevant case for examining leadership practices in curriculum reform.

### **Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum**

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN 1 Sidorejo emphasizes flexibility in lesson planning, thematic integration across subjects, and the application of project-based learning. Teachers were encouraged to design learning activities that integrate multiple subject areas within a single theme, allowing students to engage in contextual and meaningful learning experiences.

Teachers participated in a series of training activities aimed at strengthening their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in relation to project-based learning, thematic instruction, and the integration of technology into classroom practices. Learning evaluation extended beyond written examinations to include observations, portfolios, and project presentations. These practices align with international research highlighting the importance of authentic assessment in competency-based curricula (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Students reportedly demonstrated increased learning motivation, engagement, and enthusiasm, particularly when learning activities were perceived as relevant to their daily lives. Improvements were also observed in students' critical thinking skills, collaboration, and independence. These findings are consistent with studies suggesting that student-centered and project-based approaches contribute positively to learners' cognitive and socio-emotional development (Priestley et al., 2021).

### **The Principal's Role in Curriculum Implementation**

The findings reveal that the principal played a central role in supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through three interrelated functions: managerial leadership, academic supervision, and instructional leadership.

As a manager, the principal was responsible for organizing resources, allocating time for teacher development, and ensuring that school facilities supported curriculum implementation. Although resource constraints remained a challenge, strategic use of available funding, including School Operational Assistance (BOS) funds, enabled the school to prioritize teacher training and instructional needs. This finding supports prior research emphasizing the principal's role in resource management as a key factor in sustaining curriculum reform (Leithwood et al., 2020).

In terms of supervision, the principal conducted regular classroom observations and evaluation meetings to monitor teaching practices and identify challenges faced by teachers. Feedback provided through these supervisory activities contributed to gradual improvements in instructional practices. This supervisory role aligns with the concept of instructional leadership, which positions principals as facilitators of teaching quality rather than solely administrative figures (Hallinger & Wang, 2015).

As an instructional leader, the principal encouraged collaboration among teachers and fostered a culture of shared learning. Teachers were given the freedom to experiment with instructional strategies while receiving guidance and support when needed. This approach reflects findings from international studies indicating that



supportive and participatory leadership enhances teacher commitment to curriculum change (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Harris & Jones, 2017).

### **Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum**

Despite positive outcomes, several challenges were identified. Resistance to change among some teachers emerged as a major barrier, particularly among those accustomed to more structured and centralized curriculum models. Feelings of uncertainty and discomfort with new instructional demands limited the pace of curriculum adaptation.

In addition, limited access to technological resources posed challenges, especially for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Budget constraints also restricted the school's ability to provide continuous and intensive professional development. These challenges are consistent with international evidence suggesting that curriculum reform often encounters structural and cultural barriers at the school level (Day et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2020).

### **Strategies for Addressing Implementation Challenges**

To address these challenges, the principal adopted a communicative and participatory leadership approach. Open discussions and question-and-answer sessions were conducted to clarify curriculum objectives and address teachers' concerns. Mentoring arrangements were also established, allowing more experienced teachers to support colleagues who were still adapting to the new curriculum.

Regular training sessions and workshops were organized to strengthen teachers' competencies and update their pedagogical knowledge. These strategies reflect best practices in change management, which emphasize continuous professional learning, collaboration, and shared leadership as key drivers of sustainable reform (Fullan, 2016; Robinson et al., 2017).

### **Integrating Findings with International Literature**

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN 1 Sidorejo was closely linked to the principal's leadership capacity in managing resources, supervising instruction, and leading pedagogical change. This supports international scholarship that positions school leadership as a critical mediator between curriculum policy and classroom practice (Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020).

The study also highlights the importance of contextual leadership in regional primary schools, where resource limitations and varying levels of teacher readiness require adaptive and collaborative leadership strategies. By integrating managerial, supervisory, and instructional roles, the principal was able to create a supportive environment for curriculum implementation despite existing constraints.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the role of the school principal in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at a public primary school in Indonesia using an interdisciplinary qualitative approach. The findings demonstrate that effective curriculum implementation is closely associated with the principal's



ability to integrate managerial, supervisory, and instructional leadership functions within the school context.

The principal's managerial role was essential in organizing limited resources, prioritizing teacher development, and aligning school facilities with curriculum requirements. Through academic supervision, the principal was able to monitor instructional practices, provide constructive feedback, and support gradual improvements in teaching quality. As an instructional leader, the principal fostered a collaborative school culture that encouraged teacher innovation, professional learning, and shared responsibility for curriculum change.

Despite positive outcomes, the study also identified challenges related to teacher readiness, resistance to change, and limited access to technological resources. These challenges highlight that curriculum reform is not solely a technical process but a continuous organizational change that requires sustained leadership support. Overall, the findings reinforce international evidence that school leadership plays a pivotal role in mediating curriculum policy and classroom practice, particularly in resource-constrained primary school settings.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of Merdeka Curriculum implementation.

First, continuous and practice-oriented professional development should be strengthened. Training programs should focus not only on conceptual understanding of the curriculum but also on practical classroom strategies, such as project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and authentic assessment. Short, regular, and targeted training sessions may be more feasible and effective than infrequent large-scale workshops.

Second, school leadership capacity should be further developed, particularly in the areas of instructional leadership and change management. Principals should be supported through leadership training and professional networks that enable them to share experiences, strategies, and best practices related to curriculum implementation.

Third, collaborative teacher communities should be institutionalized within schools. Professional learning communities can serve as platforms for sharing instructional practices, reflecting on challenges, and collectively developing curriculum-aligned teaching materials. Such collaboration can reduce teacher resistance to change and enhance collective ownership of the curriculum.

Finally, resource optimization and strategic use of available funding should be prioritized to support curriculum implementation. Schools should focus on maximizing existing resources, including digital tools and learning materials, while advocating for additional support to address technological and infrastructure gaps, particularly in regional and under-resourced contexts.

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Vol. 3, No. 2 (2025), pp. 285-293 | p-ISSN: 3025-6585, e-ISSN: 3025-3640

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