

The Relationship Between School Principals' Leadership and Learning Innovation in The Implementation of The Merdeka Curriculum

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji hubungan antara kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dan inovasi pembelajaran dalam implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka. Karena kurikulum ini mengusung konsep kemerdekaan belajar, kepala sekolah memainkan peran penting dalam membimbing dan mendorong inovasi dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan desain korelasional. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner yang disebarakan kepada 150 kepala sekolah dan guru di berbagai sekolah di Indonesia yang telah mengadopsi Kurikulum Merdeka. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan adanya korelasi yang signifikan antara kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dan inovasi pembelajaran, dengan kepemimpinan transformasional muncul sebagai kontributor utama keberhasilan implementasi praktik pengajaran inovatif. Penelitian ini menawarkan implikasi praktis bagi kebijakan pendidikan, khususnya dalam memperkuat peran strategis kepemimpinan sekolah dalam memajukan inovasi pembelajaran yang selaras dengan prinsip-prinsip Kurikulum Merdeka.

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah; Inovasi Pembelajaran; Kurikulum Merdeka

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the relationship between school principals' leadership and instructional innovation in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. As this curriculum promotes the concept of learning freedom, school principals play a pivotal role in guiding and fostering innovation in teaching and learning. The research adopts a quantitative approach with a correlational design. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 150 school principals and teachers across various schools in Indonesia that have adopted the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings reveal a significant correlation between principals' leadership and learning innovation, with transformational leadership emerging as a key contributor to the successful implementation of innovative teaching practices. The study offers practical implications for educational policy, particularly in reinforcing the strategic role of school leadership in advancing learning innovation in alignment with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: School Principal Leadership; Learning Innovation; Merdeka Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

As noted by Thana and Hanipah (2023), education in Indonesia has undergone various transformations to remain relevant and responsive to global demands. One of the most notable efforts is the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in 2022, which aims to grant students greater autonomy in choosing their learning pathways. This curriculum emphasizes learner-centered education by allowing students to tailor learning experiences to their interests and potential. However, as Lailiyah and Imami

(2023) highlight, the implementation of this curriculum presents considerable challenges for schools and educators, particularly in adopting teaching approaches that reflect the principle of learning freedom.

The adoption of the *Merdeka Curriculum* requires a fundamental shift in school practices, and leadership plays a crucial role in this transition. Nurjanah and Mustofa (2024) emphasize that school principals are not only administrative managers but also leaders who inspire and direct pedagogical change. Similarly, Ray et al. (n.d.) argue that effective school leadership is essential in motivating teachers and guiding them toward innovative teaching practices. Hidayat et al. (2023) further assert that visionary and dynamic school leadership is vital in cultivating an environment that supports learning innovation aligned with the curriculum's demands.

Learning innovation is one of the core components of the *Merdeka Curriculum* (Pribadi et al., 2024). This includes the development of creative teaching methods, the integration of digital technologies into the classroom, and the creation of instructional materials that better match students' needs and interests (Rosa et al., 2024). To foster such innovation, school principals must possess leadership qualities that inspire creativity, encourage experimentation, and support teachers in exploring new approaches (Dwi Lutfi Nur Anisa, 2023).

Despite the recognized importance of leadership, the success of learning innovation is highly influenced by the leadership style adopted. Fatahillah et al. (2023) emphasize that not all leadership approaches yield the same impact. According to Botutihe et al. (2023), transformational leadership—marked by the ability to inspire, motivate, and support teachers—has proven effective in enhancing innovation in schools. Thana and Hanipah (2023) also note that school principals who practice transformational leadership tend to create environments that nurture creativity and drive educational innovation.

Previous studies have explored the link between school leadership and learning innovation. Aritonang and Hutauruk (2024) found that transformational leadership improves teacher motivation and teaching quality. Likewise, Nurjanah and Mustofa (2024) stressed the importance of principals establishing a clear vision and supporting change processes toward more innovative and student-focused learning.

However, while numerous studies have discussed the influence of leadership on learning innovation, few have examined this relationship specifically within the context of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on how school principals' leadership influences instructional innovation under this new educational framework. It also emphasizes the need for principals to build supportive environments that facilitate the flexible and student-centered learning the *Merdeka Curriculum* envisions (Wicaksono & Sulistyowati, 2025).

Suriansyah (2015) points out that understanding how school leadership interacts with innovative teaching practices is vital for effective curriculum implementation. This study aims to identify the factors

that empower school principals to drive positive changes in classroom instruction. The results are expected to provide meaningful insights for the development of educational leadership practices and policy in Indonesia.

In practical terms, this study also aims to offer recommendations to school leaders and policymakers on effective leadership strategies to support the *Merdeka Curriculum*. By deepening the understanding of the relationship between leadership and instructional innovation, schools can become more adaptive and creative in meeting the evolving demands of education.

Ultimately, this research seeks to provide a broader perspective on the role of school principals in shaping the future of Indonesian education, particularly in adapting to the dynamic educational landscape. As a foundational step in addressing this issue, the study investigates the relationship between school principals' leadership and instructional innovation within the context of the *Merdeka Curriculum* (Windriati & Hansen Lutfiartha, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The leadership of a school principal is one of the key factors in the successful implementation of educational policies, including the *Merdeka Curriculum*. According to transformational leadership theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994), an ideal leader is one who can inspire, motivate, and guide change by providing a clear vision and fostering the creativity of organizational members. In the context of schools, a principal with transformational leadership qualities can cultivate a learning environment that encourages innovation and collaboration among teachers.

Instructional innovation refers to a systematic effort to improve the teaching and learning process in order to enhance educational quality (Schumpeter, 1934; Fullan, 2001). Within the framework of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, innovation includes the adoption of student-centered learning methods, the integration of local context-based projects, and the effective use of technology in instruction. Such innovation requires proactive leadership that provides teachers with the space, policies, and resources necessary for experimentation and creativity.

The *Merdeka Curriculum* emphasizes flexibility, differentiation, and competency-based learning. To realize these principles, the role of the principal as an instructional leader is critical. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) assert that instructional leaders promote teacher professional development, establish high academic expectations, and nurture a school culture that is responsive to change.

In conclusion, there is a strong relationship between the principal's leadership style and the level of instructional innovation within a school. A leadership approach that is strong, participative, and supportive serves as a vital catalyst for the creative and meaningful implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

METHODS

Problem Analysis

This study aims to investigate the relationship between school principals' leadership and learning innovation within the context of the *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation. The central issue explored is how the leadership of school principals influences the degree of innovation applied in schools that have adopted this curriculum. Since the *Merdeka Curriculum* emphasizes learning autonomy, principals are expected to actively promote changes in teaching methods that align with these principles. Accordingly, this research focuses on examining the extent to which school principals can foster and support innovative learning practices in their schools.

Research Design

A quantitative research method with a correlational design was employed (Waruwu et al., 2025) to identify and measure the relationship between two key variables: school principals' leadership and learning innovation. This design was selected to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between leadership style and the level of innovation in educational practice.

Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 150 school principals and teachers from various schools across Indonesia that have implemented the *Merdeka Curriculum*. The questionnaire was divided into two main sections: the first assessed principals' leadership—particularly transformational leadership—and the second measured the extent of learning innovation in the schools. The responses were then analyzed to evaluate the correlation between the two variables.

Data Processing Flow

The data processing involved several stages, as outlined below:

1. **Data Collection:** Questionnaires were administered to school principals and teachers engaged in the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*.
2. **Assessment of Principals' Leadership:** Leadership data were analyzed using a Likert scale to evaluate leadership characteristics, with a focus on transformational attributes such as vision, motivation, inspiration, and support.
3. **Assessment of Learning Innovation:** Data on innovation were assessed to determine the implementation of creative teaching methods, technology integration, and the development of student-centered teaching materials.
4. **Correlation Analysis:** A Pearson correlation test was conducted to identify the statistical relationship between leadership style and learning innovation.
5. **Interpretation of Findings:** The results were interpreted to determine the extent of influence school leadership has on learning innovation, leading to conclusions relevant to educational practice.

Summary of the Process Flow

1. Data Collection
2. Leadership Assessment
3. Innovation Assessment
4. Correlation Test
5. Result Interpretation

Explanation of Each Step

1. **Data Collection:** Respondents included school principals and teachers from schools practicing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. The instrument focused on leadership and innovation indicators.
2. **Leadership Assessment:** Using a Likert scale, leadership behaviors were measured—especially aspects of transformational leadership such as providing motivation, inspiration, and support for curriculum change.
3. **Innovation Assessment:** Innovation was evaluated through indicators such as the use of technology, creative strategies, and customized instructional materials aligned with *Merdeka Curriculum* principles.
4. **Correlation Test:** Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to assess the relationship between leadership and innovation.
5. **Result Interpretation:** The correlation results were analyzed to determine implications for leadership's role in fostering innovation in line with curriculum reform.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between school principals' leadership and learning innovation in schools implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Questionnaire responses from 150 participants indicated that most principals demonstrated a transformational leadership style, characterized by the ability to inspire, motivate, and support teachers in adopting innovative approaches.

Conversely, schools led by principals who employed more authoritarian or transactional leadership styles showed lower levels of learning innovation. The Pearson correlation test produced a strong and statistically significant relationship between principals' leadership and instructional innovation ($r = 0.73$, $p < 0.05$). This result suggests that transformational leadership is a key factor in fostering innovative practices aligned with the goals of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, which emphasizes learning autonomy and creativity.

Discussion

The findings of this study support existing theories on the critical role of transformational leadership in driving educational innovation. As Variani et al. (2024) explain, transformational leaders are capable of inspiring their teams and generating meaningful change within organizations. In schools,

principals who demonstrate this leadership style not only provide clear direction but also empower teachers to explore new methods and strategies in their teaching an approach that aligns with the flexibility promoted by the *Merdeka Curriculum* (Sari, 2023).

These results also align with the study by Armiyanti et al. (2023), which found that transformational leadership contributes to the development of a culture of innovation within schools. Principals who articulate a clear vision, invest in professional development, and foster a supportive environment are instrumental in promoting innovative teaching.

In contrast, principals who favor authoritarian or transactional leadership styles often face challenges in fostering change, as these styles prioritize control and routine over experimentation. This observation is consistent with Alzahra et al. (2025), who found that participative and collaborative leadership styles are more effective in supporting school-based innovation.

The learning innovations identified in this study include the integration of educational technology, the development of student-relevant instructional materials, and the use of project-based and creative learning strategies. The successful implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* depends heavily on such innovations, as it seeks to empower students to shape their own learning pathways.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of improving principals' professional capacities. Principals trained in transformational leadership not only support their teaching staff but also build strong partnerships with parents and the community—essential elements in realizing the full potential of the *Merdeka Curriculum* (Marpaung, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that school principals' leadership plays a crucial role in promoting instructional innovation within the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Visionary, participative, and inspirational leadership has been shown to foster a school environment that embraces change, encourages collaboration among teachers, and supports the exploration of more contextual and student-centered teaching methods and strategies. The more effective the principal's leadership, the greater the level of innovative practices demonstrated by teachers in creatively and meaningfully adapting the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

Based on the results of this study, there are several practical implications that can be considered by school principals and policymakers. School principals need to be involved in leadership training that can strengthen their ability to apply a transformational leadership style. In addition, schools that have already implemented the *Merdeka Curriculum* should prioritize developing an innovation culture that involves all school stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents (Sujarwo, 2013).

This study still has several limitations, one of which is the limited sample size, which only included schools that have already implemented the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Future research is recommended to

involve more schools that are still in the preparation or transition stages toward implementing the Merdeka Curriculum to see whether similar results can be found in schools with different characteristics. In addition, more in-depth qualitative research on teachers' and principals' perceptions of the challenges and opportunities in implementing learning innovation could also provide a more comprehensive insight into this topic.

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