

Principals as Innovative Leaders in the Independent Learning Transformation

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DOI: [10.38073/jimpi.v4i1.1908](https://doi.org/10.38073/jimpi.v4i1.1908)

Received: November 2024

Accepted: January 2025

Published: January 2025

Abstract :

The *Merdeka Belajar* program, initiated by the Minister of Education, Nadiem Makarim, encourages principals to adjust the curriculum and supporting programs to create an independent, creative, and collaborative learning environment. The purpose of this study was to determine the role of the principal as an innovator in the transformation of independent learning at SDIT Mufidatul 'Ilmi. The study used a qualitative method in which researchers collected data through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. The results of the study showed that in carrying out the role of an innovative principal, it was done by creating creative and student-oriented learning management policies and utilizing existing facilities in the school environment, as a facilitator for teacher competency development, building a democratic school culture, and liaising with external stakeholders for school progress. In addition, the principal provides opportunities for teachers and education personnel to improve their skills through various activities at school and with school partners. Collaboration with parents of students and the local government is also continuously carried out to maintain positive synergy and create good and harmonious relationships. This study reveals the role of the principal as an innovator in the *Merdeka Belajar* policy, highlighting learning management strategies, teacher competency development, and collaboration with stakeholders.

Keywords: *Principal, Innovator, Independent Learning*

Abstrak :

Program *Merdeka Belajar*, yang diinisiasi oleh Menteri Pendidikan Nadiem Makarim, mendorong kepala sekolah untuk menyesuaikan kurikulum dan program pendukung demi menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang mandiri, kreatif, dan kolaboratif. Tujuan penelitian ini untuk mengetahui peran kepala sekolah sebagai inovator dalam transformasi *Merdeka Belajar* di SDIT Mufidatul 'Ilmi. Penelitian dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif yang mana peneliti mengumpulkan data dengan cara wawancara semi terstruktur, observasi non participant dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dalam menjalankan peran kepala sekolah yang inovatif dilakukan dengan membuat kebijakan pengelolaan pembelajaran yang kreatif dan berorientasi kepada siswa serta memanfaatkan fasilitas yang ada di lingkungan sekolah, sebagai fasilitator pengembangan kompetensi guru, membangun budaya sekolah yang demokratis dan penghubung dengan stakeholder eksternal untuk kemajuan sekolah. Selain itu, kepala sekolah memberikan kesempatan kepada guru dan tenaga kependidikan untuk meningkatkan keterampilan mereka melalui berbagai kegiatan di sekolah maupun bersama mitra sekolah. Kolaborasi dengan orang tua siswa dan pemerintah setempat juga terus dilakukan untuk menjaga sinergi positif serta menciptakan hubungan yang baik dan harmonis. Penelitian ini mengungkap peran kepala sekolah sebagai inovator dalam kebijakan *Merdeka Belajar*, menyoroti strategi

pengelolaan pembelajaran, pengembangan kompetensi guru, dan kolaborasi dengan stakeholder.

Kata Kunci: Kepala Sekolah, Inovator, Merdeka Belajar

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture initiated the *Merdeka Belajar* education program, which aims to provide schools, teachers, and students the freedom and flexibility to learn according to their respective needs and potentials. The *Merdeka Belajar* program makes schools an environment that allows students to develop independently, creatively, and collaboratively in a learning process that is relevant to the needs of the times.¹ This concept is part of educational institutions in improving the quality of education and must open themselves as educational institutions that are able to play a role and contribute to the welfare of the people, especially in the era of the industrial revolution 4.0. The government itself states that this concept is freedom of thought in accordance with the mandate of the 1945 Constitution and Pancasila. Also, the skills of finding, managing, and conveying information and being skilled at using information and technology are very much needed. Based on this, the "independent learning" education program provides a new paradigm that in the future education will no longer be limited to cognitive assessments but also affective and psychomotor assessments.² This is where the role of the principal as an innovative leader becomes increasingly important in supporting and guiding the success of this transformation.

As a leader, the principal not only plays an administrative role but also acts as a driver of change who is able to translate the vision of *Merdeka Belajar* into real practices in schools. An innovative principal has the ability to motivate educators, empower education personnel, and collaborate with parents and the community to support the achievement of broader educational goals. The success of a school lies in the cooperation of a group of people who carry out their duties and responsibilities in order to achieve the desired goals. Among them are the principal and teachers. The principal is a teacher who is given additional duties as a leader and plays an important role in improving the quality of education, as well as being the main driver in the development and progress of his school.³ Through a creative and collaborative approach, principals can build a flexible and adaptive learning environment, in accordance with the spirit of *Merdeka Belajar*.

The challenges in implementing *Merdeka Belajar* require principals who not only understand the concept but are also able to implement changes effectively. Principals need to develop programs that support improving teacher competency, integrate technology into learning activities, and provide a variety of learning media that suit students' needs. With the role of innovative principals, schools can become dynamic learning centers, provide meaningful learning experiences, and produce generations that are ready to face future challenges.

¹ Edy Sulaiman et al., *Inovasi Pembelajaran Era Merdeka Belajar Dan Kampus Merdeka*, 2024.

² Husain Nurisman et al., "The Role of Human Resources in Facing an Independent Curriculum: Literature Review," *Journal of Scientific Research, Education, and Technology (JSRET)* 2, no. 4 (November 27, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.58526/jsret.v2i4.283>.

³ Yanti Ervina Siahaan and Indra Prasetya, "Efektivitas Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah Dalam Meningkatkan Kinerja Guru Di SMP Negeri 6 Tebing Tinggi," *Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Dasar, Menengah Dan Tinggi [JMP-DMT]* 4, no. 1 (January 25, 2023): 08-15, <https://doi.org/10.30596/jmp-dmt.v4i1.12403>.

Several studies have been conducted discussing the principal as an innovator. Such as research by Hasanah and Mustofa,⁴ which resulted in the findings that school principals with creative and innovative approaches can implement various innovations in school management, teacher professional development, and technology integration in learning, which have contributed to achieving A accreditation. Research by Heryani et al.,⁵ which found that innovative leadership includes constructive, creative, delegative, integrative, rational, objective, pragmatic, exemplary, disciplined, adaptable and flexible. Research by Angga and Iskandar,⁶ which shows that the principal as a leader determines the direction of policy and has an important role and position in school achievement. Then research by Nurrochman et al.,⁷ which examines the role of principal learning leadership through digital transformation. As well as research by Hidayat et al.,⁸ which examines the effectiveness of principal leadership in implementing the Merdeka curriculum. However, research that examines the role of innovative leaders (principals) in the *Merdeka Belajar* transformation still needs to be explored more deeply and is the principal's main responsibility to make the *Merdeka Belajar* vision a sustainable reality and have a real impact on all components of the school.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research on the principal as an innovative leader in the transformation of independent learning is a field research using qualitative methods. This study will explain the events that took place in real terms and facts by collecting data and information objectively. The data collection technique used is that researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders at SDIT Mufidatul Ilmi, namely the principal, teacher representatives, and student representatives and parent representatives by asking general and specific questions that have been compiled in the interview guidelines according to relevant theories. This aims to ensure that the information obtained from several informants can be in-depth and researchers can explore and understand the facts that occur in the field.

To obtain valid and credible data, researchers also conducted non-participant observations through supporting documents and social media to observe and obtain actual data and examine documentary evidence as a complement to research data. Then the data was analyzed and conclusions were drawn. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman data analysis model, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To test the validity of the data, credibility,

⁴ Nur Hasanah and Triono Ali Mustofa, "Inovasi Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah Dalam Mengembangkan Sekolah Unggul Di SMP Al-Qolam Gemolong," *Didaktika: Jurnal Kependidikan* 13, no. 3 (July 30, 2024): 2951-62, <https://doi.org/10.58230/27454312.823>.

⁵ Rosalina Dewi Heryani et al., "Kepemimpinan Inovatif Kepala Sekolah Sman 106 Jakarta Timur," *Research and Development Journal of Education* 9, no. 1 (April 11, 2023): 225-33, <https://doi.org/10.30998/RDJE.V9I1.15537>.

⁶ Angga Angga and Sopyan Iskandar, "Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah Dalam Mewujudkan Merdeka Belajar Di Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal Basicedu* 6, no. 3 (May 12, 2022): 5295-5301, <https://doi.org/10.31004/basicedu.v6i3.2918>.

⁷ Taufik Nurrochman, Darsinah Darsinah, and Wafroaturrohman Wafroaturrohman, "Peran Kepemimpinan Pembelajaran Kepala Sekolah Melalui Transformasi Digital Pasca Pandemi Di Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal Tarbiyah Dan Ilmu Keguruan Borneo* 4, no. 3 (July 2, 2023): 299-310, <https://doi.org/10.21093/jtikborneo.v4i3.6905>.

⁸ Erik Hidayat, Anggiat Pardosi, and Irwan Zulkarnaen, "Efektivitas Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah Dalam Penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka," *Jurnal Studi Guru Dan Pembelajaran* 6, no. 1 (April 30, 2023): 9-18, <https://doi.org/10.30605/jsgp.6.1.2023.2339>.

transferability, dependability, and confirmability tests were carried out.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Principal Leadership

Principal leadership plays an important role in realizing the goals and objectives of the school's vision and mission, because the principal is considered the main driver of school life and a guide for all elements in it. In addition, the principal is also encouraged to develop school efforts, regardless of whether the vision and mission have been formally implemented or not. The principal must also develop regulations and supporting administrative information systems. This is important because competition between schools is getting tighter so that each school can achieve unique results. Some schools have even experienced significant improvements in quality thanks to the leadership of the principal. Improving school quality is not a one-party task, because there are still many stakeholders involved and committed to improving school quality in order to create a better future generation.⁹

The role of the principal in an educational institution that has the task of organizing and moving a number of people who have different attitudes, behaviors, and backgrounds. In running the wheels of leadership, the principal formulates the school's strategic plan starting from the vision and mission of the strategy; its development must be used as a guideline in developing the school's operational plan. The essence of leadership is followership, namely the willingness of others or subordinates to follow the leader's wishes. That is what causes someone to become a leader.¹⁰

The principal is responsible for micro-management of education, which is directly related to the learning process at school. As stated in Article 12 paragraph 1 of PP 28 of 1990 that "The principal is responsible for organizing educational activities, school administration, coaching other educational staff and the utilization and maintenance of facilities and infrastructure".¹¹ The principal is part of the educational staff in the school who is considered to have experience and has met the requirements as a school leader so that he is chosen to become the principal. The authorities and responsibilities include developing the curriculum, managing the development of human resources in the school, and public relations.¹² An integral component of effective school management lies in the leadership demonstrated by the principal, characterized by the ability to introduce innovative ideas and drive change within the school ecosystem. This involves adapting and redefining goals, objectives, organizational structures, processes, or outputs to meet the evolving demands and challenges faced by the educational institution.¹³

Principal as Learning Innovator

As an educational leader at the school level, the principal has a strategic role

⁹ Dita Prihatna Wati et al., "Analisis Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah Di Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal Basicedu* 6, no. 5 (June 21, 2022): 7970-77, <https://doi.org/10.31004/BASICEDU.V6I5.3684>.

¹⁰ Diningrum Citraningsih and Suprih Hidayat, "Strategi Kepala Sekolah Dalam Optimalisasi Kinerja Guru Di SD Negeri 2 Gombong," *SALIHA: Jurnal Pendidikan & Agama Islam* 1, no. 1 (January 15, 2018): 54-68.

¹¹ Lailatu Zahroh, "Upaya Kepala Sekolah Sebagai Inovator Dalam Meningkatkan Kinerjanya Di Sd Tarbiyatul Athfal," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam (Journal of Islamic Education Studies)* 1, no. 2 (February 3, 2013): 246-66, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JPAI.2013.1.2.246-266>.

¹² Prihatna Wati et al., "Analisis Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah Di Sekolah Dasar."

¹³ Tamrin Fathoni, "Strategi Pembinaan Dan Pengembangan Kepala Sekolah," *Global Education Journal* 2, no. 1 (February 25, 2024): 63-71, <https://doi.org/10.59525/GEJ.V2I1.326>.

to be an innovator in creating relevant and contextual programs in accordance with the goals of *Merdeka Belajar*. The principal is required to be able to create an atmosphere that supports teacher creativity in designing various teaching methods, for example through project-based learning or contextual learning that involves the surrounding community.

This learning innovation also includes efforts to introduce technology in teaching and learning activities. For example, the principal can initiate the use of digital platforms for distance learning, or support the use of applications and software that help the online learning process. This innovation needs to be supported by training and guidance for teachers, so that they feel comfortable and are able to adapt to the use of technology.

In carrying out his duties as a principal which is closely related to an innovator, the principal made a breakthrough by creating a learning program that prioritizes student-centered learning, because the focus of the independent learning program is the teacher as a facilitator in designing a more diverse learning experience by adjusting the needs and abilities of students. The goal is to encourage students to develop critical, collaborative, and more creative skills (MR, interview, March 15, 2024). The innovative behavior of the school from the principal influences managerial competence.¹⁴

As a driver of change in the educational component in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the principal plays an important role in the success of the *Merdeka Belajar* program in schools. By participating as a driving school, schools can more easily design and implement educational programs that support self-development for all existing resources. Through the driving school program, the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology provides various learning opportunities that enrich knowledge, which can then be applied gradually in schools, including the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum.

Research conducted by Heryani et al.¹⁵ that the principal integrates learning activities by implementing the management of learning projects for the Pancasila student profile content. Based on the provisions of the academic field, it is possible to schedule projects face-to-face and independently outside the classroom. However, in practice, teachers must pay attention to the level of student involvement when outside the classroom. These activities must always be evaluated and to avoid unexpected conditions, therefore activities must be monitored by the supervising teacher and ensure that activities outside the classroom are in accordance with the plans and themes that have been determined and are the responsibility of the student affairs department.

Principal as Facilitator of Teacher Competency Development

As an innovator, the principal not only focuses on student learning, but also plays a role in improving teacher competence. The principal needs to develop self-development programs for teachers, such as professional training, workshops, or collaboration with other educational institutions. This is important so that teachers can continue to develop innovative learning methods and in accordance with the principles of *Merdeka Belajar*. In addition, the principal can also encourage the

¹⁴ Marlina Siregar et al., "Pengaruh Perilaku Inovatif Terhadap Kompetensi Manajerial Kepala Sekolah Dasar Di Kabupaten Labuhan Batu," *Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pengkajian Ilmu Pendidikan: E-Saintika* 4, no. 2 (June 27, 2020): 119-25, <https://doi.org/10.36312/E-SAINTIKA.V4I2.190>.

¹⁵ Heryani et al., "Kepemimpinan Inovatif Kepala Sekolah SMAN 106 Jakarta Timur."

formation of learning communities between teachers, both inside and outside the school. With this community, teachers can share experiences and innovative ideas, so that they can support each other in implementing new learning methods in the classroom.

The principal involves teachers and education personnel in various routine trainings every weekend, either through learning community forums or training programs held at the sub-district, district, and national levels, both offline and online. In addition, the principal assigns tasks to teachers according to their respective expertise, supports their self-development, and provides appreciation to teachers who have innovated in teaching methods in the classroom. As stated in the research of Lismana et al.¹⁶ that the principal created a coaching and training program for the renewal of educators who are not yet proficient in technology, the program that has been implemented is in-house training for two days, this activity aims to utilize digital by conducting training for all teachers, in addition the principal also holds routine program activities, namely KKG (teacher working group) which is attended by all lower and upper class teachers. This activity can support teacher competence to have more understanding of science related to digitalization in the field of education.

Innovation in coaching helps teachers become more adaptive and responsive to students' needs, and creates a culture of sustainable learning.¹⁷ Opportunity to gain experience that can provide additional insight into the administrative and management aspects of the school, which is essential for their career development. To ensure that all teachers get equal opportunities in various tasks and responsibilities, the school implements a rotation system. By rotating, teachers gain broader and more diverse experiences, which not only enhance their skills but also help in personal and professional development.¹⁸

Principal as Leader in Building a Democratic School Culture

One of the cores of *Merdeka Belajar* is to provide freedom and independence for students and teachers. The principal as an innovator must be able to build a democratic school culture where students and teachers have space to express their opinions and contribute to decision-making. The principal, MI, holds regular forums between teachers and school staff to discuss existing problems, provide space for new ideas, or design more relevant programs. In addition, the principal also often chats with students and listens to their stories, so that the principal is able to get input or information objectively to make appropriate and fair policies for all elements of school stakeholders.

The principal also has a democratic role, such as independently implementing policies concerning the interests of the school.¹⁹ Where the principal is making a policy, then all teachers, school employees, and also possibly

¹⁶ Eva Afifah Lismana, M. Taufik, and Triana Pamungkas Alamsyah, "Optimalisasi Peran Kepala Sekolah Sebagai Inovator Dalam Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran Berbasis IT Di SD PLTU Suralaya Wukir RetawuNANo Ranking Found for 'Jurnal Inovasi Pembelajaran Di Sekolah,'" *Bina Gogik* 9, no. 1 (2022): 116–25.

¹⁷ Fitria Sari, Vidia Pandji Yudha, and Sholeh Hidayat, "Peran Dan Tanggung Jawab Kepala Sekolah Sebagai Manajer, Pimpinan Dan Inovator," *Pendas : Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Dasar* 9, no. 3 (August 28, 2024): 813–21, <https://doi.org/10.23969/JP.V9I3.17557>.

¹⁸ Hasanah and Mustofa, "Inovasi Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah Dalam Mengembangkan Sekolah Unggul Di SMP Al-Qolam Gemolong."

¹⁹ Ismail Akbar Brahma, "Peranan Kepala Sekolah dalam Menumbuhkan Sikap Demokrasi Guru di SDN Mekarjaya 31 Depok," *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan (JIP) STKIP Kusuma Negara* 12, no. 1 (July 22, 2020): 61–69, <https://doi.org/10.37640/jip.v12i1.169>.

stakeholders in the school must be involved, such as the school committee or school association. Coordination meeting activities are carried out to obtain and provide information and also discuss something. In addition to establishing familiarity between teachers and the principal, it makes teachers open to expressing opinions and feeling cared for.²⁰

Formulating policies or procedures, the principal can hold discussions with various parties involved and conduct in-depth studies, as an effort to avoid rejection from teachers or parents, so that all parties agree with the results of the decisions made. With democratic leadership, the principal can also inspire teachers to provide more student-centered learning. Thus, students are empowered to actively learn, think critically, and explore their potential optimally.

Principal as External Resource Liaison

In the context of *Merdeka Belajar*, schools are encouraged to collaborate with various parties, such as parents, communities, businesses, and other educational institutions. The principal as an innovator is responsible for establishing this partnership, which can have a positive impact on school programs. The principal can initiate collaboration with the industrial world or local companies, where students can learn directly through internships or practical activities in the field. This provides students with real experience that is relevant to the world of work, in accordance with the principles of *Merdeka Belajar*, which emphasize contextual experiences for students.

The principal, MI, collaborates with external stakeholders, such as parents of students and the local government. The principal came up with the idea of creating a liaison group between the school and guardians as a means for class teachers to convey information related to learning activities and other important information. In addition, a Parent Teacher Forum (FOG) is also held every semester, which is a forum for evaluation and receiving input from parents regarding school programs. In important activities, the school also always involves parents to work together.

Collaboration with the local District Education and Culture Office is carried out through ongoing coordination and communication in various programs, especially to improve the quality of education in schools. Examples of this form of collaboration include receiving assistance for the construction of Learning Classrooms (RKB) in 2023 and 2024, opportunities for teachers to become resource persons at the district level, designating schools as monitoring and evaluation locations by the BPMP, BGP, and South Sumatra Provincial Education Office teams, and providing Chromebook assistance to support school digitalization activities.

In line with the research of Handini et al.,²¹ the principal creates a harmonious and creative relationship by establishing cooperation and always trying to foster and develop good cooperative relationships between the school and the community in order to create an effective and efficient school. This can be seen from the principal holding informal meetings with school residents, asking for new ideas, managing school development towards a learning organization, and caring about a pleasant working atmosphere.

²⁰ Selvia Wahyuni and Sulastris Sulastris, "Persepsi Guru Terhadap Peran Kepala Sekolah Sebagai Inovator Di Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan Negeri Se-Kabupaten Padang Pariaman," *Journal of Educational Administration and Leadership* 3, no. 3 (February 27, 2023): 192-98, <https://doi.org/10.24036/JEAL.V3I3.286>.

²¹ Elvira Handini, Zulkifli N, and Hukmi, "Peranan Kepala Sekolah Sebagai Inovator Di Taman Kanak-Kanak Se-Kecamatan Payung Sekaki Dan Se-Kecamatan Sukajadi Kota Pekanbaru," *Jurnal Online Mahasiswa Fakultas Keguruan Dan Ilmu Pendidikan Universitas Riau* 3, no. 2 (2016): 1-11.

The principal as a manager and leading leader is required to be an innovator in education in the context of implementing school-based management. The principal can approach parties related to educational development (stakeholders), so that the implementation of education can run according to the aspirations of the community.²²

Students are also involved in the independent learning program by implementing the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project, providing opportunities for students to participate in extracurricular programs such as English tutoring, Arabic, reading clinics for grade 1 students, *pencak silat*, and futsal, and participating in various competitions held in the school environment or national competitions. The existence of various activities aims to equip students with academic and non-academic abilities so that they are ready to become the next generation of a progressive nation. Extracurricular activities are also carried out to improve students' abilities.

CONCLUSION

As an innovator in the *Merdeka Belajar* program, the principal has a crucial role in encouraging innovation in the school environment. By acting as a proactive leader, the principal can create an inclusive and adaptive learning culture, which is able to develop the potential of students and teachers optimally. This role not only has an impact on the success of the *Merdeka Belajar* program but also on the progress of Indonesian education in forming a more critical, creative, and independent generation. In addition, the principal also provides opportunities for teachers and education personnel to develop their abilities in several activities carried out at school or at partner schools. Collaborative activities with parents of students and the local government are also carried out so that positive synergy and good and harmonious relationships are always established.

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²² Arif Rahman, "Kepala Sekolah Sebagai Inovator Dalam Pendidikan (Dalam Rangka Pelaksanaan Manajemen Berbasis Sekolah)" (2016).

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