



The leadership of madrasah principals as change agents in the educational management reform of the merdeka curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The leadership of madrasah principals plays a strategic role as change agents in implementing educational management reforms, particularly in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. This study aims to analyze how madrasah principals initiate, direct, and oversee managerial transformations to ground the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum within the madrasah environment. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies in several madrasahs that served as research samples. The results indicate that the transformative leadership of madrasah principals, which is adaptive, collaborative, and visionary, is key in building a free and participatory learning culture. The madrasah principal acts as a facilitator of change, a driver of learning innovation, and a strengthening force in madrasah governance based on the values of moderation and progress. These findings recommend the importance of strengthening the leadership capacity of madrasah principals through continuous training and policy mentoring to effectively and sustainably manage curriculum change dynamics. This article uses a library research method with a descriptive-qualitative approach and thematic analysis to explore the strategic role of madrasah principals as change agents in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The study is conducted by reviewing relevant literature to identify patterns, concepts, and challenges in transformative leadership and managerial strategies within the context of educational reform in madrasahs. The study results show that madrasah principals play a central role as change agents in the educational management reform based on the Merdeka Curriculum. The transformative and participatory leadership applied includes strengthening planning, developing contextual curricula, managing human resources, and integrating technology. Despite facing structural and cultural challenges, madrasah principals are able to overcome obstacles through effective communication, empowering teachers, and creating an adaptive learning ecosystem to ensure relevant and sustainable educational quality.

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Introduction

The term 21st-century learning model can roughly be applied to the Merdeka Belajar policy, emphasizing the higher-order thinking skills expected to be applied by students so that they are able to compete with students from other countries (Juita et al., 2024). According to a report from UNICEF, Indonesia is ranked 72nd out of 77 countries in terms of education quality. This ranking indicates that the quality of education in Indonesia is considered low. This condition is caused by various factors, one of which is the poor quality of education found in educational institutions (Latifah et al., 2021).

In Vygotsky's sociocultural theory framework, leadership is seen as a mediating process built through social and cultural interactions to improve education quality. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasizes that an individual's potential develops optimally when assisted by someone with more experience, including leaders or educators (Parker, 1979). In the context of madrasahs, the principal plays the role of a change agent as well as a strategic learning guide for teachers and students in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes differentiated learning, character strengthening, and the development of higher-order thinking skills, aligning well with Vygotsky's view.

The role of school/madrasah leadership in enhancing independent teacher learning is manifested through the provision of additional tasks and the availability of learning resources needed by teachers. Additional tasks are given to teachers outside their teaching duties as a form of professional capacity development. Learning resources in the form of books have also been facilitated by school principals, recognizing that these books are essential for teachers to support the independent learning process (Wati et al., 2022). The provision of learning resources such as books reflects the instructional leadership dimension of the madrasah principal, where support for teachers' learning needs is a priority. Books as learning resources play an important role in the reflective process for teachers and also serve as a medium for the continuous improvement of pedagogical literacy. Meeting these learning resource needs also shows the principal's awareness of the importance of creating an independent and adaptive learning ecosystem within the madrasah. Moreover, this approach reflects a paradigm shift in leadership from being administrative to a more visionary and change-driven form. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, the principal's role becomes strategic as they can stimulate a lifelong learning culture for teachers, the main educators in the classroom. Thus, this practice not only strengthens the individual capabilities of teachers but also encourages a broader institutional transformation, particularly in improving the quality of education that is adaptive to dynamic curriculum policies.

Vygotsky emphasized the importance of a supportive, contextual, and collaborative learning environment. Therefore, the leadership of the madrasah principal in developing an educational ecosystem that is dialogic, reflective, and participatory becomes crucial in realizing the transformation of educational management oriented towards free and meaningful learning (Parker, 1979). National education reform enters a new chapter with the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum as a concrete manifestation of a more contextual, flexible learning system focused on the holistic development of students' potential. In this context, madrasahs, as educational institutions with distinct Islamic values, are expected to respond to curriculum changes in an adaptive and innovative manner. The process of educational management reform in madrasahs requires not only technical policies but also visionary leadership capable of being a change agent at the institutional level, including within madrasahs.

Leadership is understood as the capacity to influence individuals or groups to achieve collective goals and is a fundamental element in the success of an organization's

management. A leader's role goes beyond decision-making and team organization; they also play a crucial role in motivating, inspiring, and bridging the gap between strategic vision and operational implementation. The essence of leadership lies in achieving goals through collaboration within a team (Adiawaty, 2021). The madrasah principal plays a central role in determining the direction and success of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation. Effective leadership is demonstrated not only through administrative skills but also in inspiring the madrasah community to actively engage in building an independent, collaborative, and contextual learning ecosystem. In reality, educational management reform in madrasahs still faces various challenges, such as resource limitations, resistance to change, and a weak innovation culture.

Transformational leadership is seen as a form of leadership that can create fundamental changes in an organization's systems and culture, allowing for the development of innovation and creativity among followers to achieve the established vision. Transformational leadership is characterized by encouraging followers to realize the importance of their work outcomes, prioritize the interests of the team or organization, and meet higher-level needs. Consistency between beliefs, words, and actions must be maintained, while inconsistency between speech and actions is prohibited. Calls for action should be made with care, and self-evaluation should be carried out continuously. A leader is also expected to set an example before giving direction (Mufidah & Syafi'aturrosyidah, 2023).

Leaders are typically understood as figures or individuals who perform leadership roles, while leadership itself is viewed as a characteristic or trait that an individual possesses to influence others in achieving a goal. In a team, good leadership can be demonstrated through coordination and synergy of available resources. Furthermore, the ability to explore and develop the potential of each team member should also be fostered by effective leadership. Leadership is practiced as a means to refine various skills necessary for a leader. In a team, achieving goals depends significantly on the leader's skills and how these skills are applied optimally (Febrianto, 2021). In the context of education, particularly in madrasah environments that implement the Merdeka Curriculum, the leader is often positioned as the individual who performs the leadership role, while leadership itself is understood as a character that a person possesses to influence others in achieving common goals. In a team of educators in a madrasah, effective leadership is shown through the ability to coordinate and synergize all available educational resources. The potential of each teacher or educational staff should also be explored and developed through participatory and transformational leadership approaches. Through leadership processes, various leadership skills need to be continually honed and applied. In the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasahs, achieving learning goals and developing student character is highly determined by how collaborative, adaptive, and inspirational the leadership of the madrasah principal can be.

The post-COVID-19 pandemic is an important moment for the establishment of the national curriculum policy, based on the evaluation of the curriculum's implementation during the learning recovery period. This evaluation became the foundation for the Ministry of Education and Culture's subsequent policy direction after the recovery. The Merdeka Curriculum was designed as a more flexible framework, emphasizing mastery of essential content as well as the strengthening of character and student competencies. Some key characteristics of this curriculum that support learning recovery efforts include: (1) the application of project-based learning to develop soft skills and character in line with the Pancasila Student Profile; and (2) a focus on essential content, allowing for deeper learning time to master basic competencies such as literacy and numeracy (Ledia & Bustam, 2023).

Therefore, the transformational leadership of the school principal is positioned as the spearhead and main guide in the operation of educational institutions. When an educational institution is not led by an adaptive and creative figure, the optimization of the institution's performance tends not to be maximized, and even setbacks may occur. Essentially, through transformational leadership, the process of improving morale and motivation to higher levels is carried out reciprocally between the leader and the followers. Therefore, the application of transformational leadership styles should be implemented by school principals in Islamic educational institutions (Mufidah & Syafi'aturrosyidah, 2023). Thus, from this academic concern, there is a need for in-depth studies on the role of madrasah principals as change agents in overseeing the reform of educational management in the Merdeka Curriculum. This study aims to identify the forms of transformational leadership shown by madrasah principals, strategies applied in facing changes, and supporting and inhibiting factors in the educational management reform process. The findings of this study are expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to strengthening the leadership capacity of madrasahs in realizing high-quality, relevant, and competitive education in the era of the new curriculum.

Method

The method is written without subsections, consisting of a single paragraph that briefly describes: the type of research, data type, data collection procedures, how data is processed, including how conclusions are drawn. If the writing is a literature review or involves research ideas, the research method does not need to be included. (Using Cambria 11, 1.0 spacing). This article employs a library research method as the primary approach. The literature review is conducted by critically examining various relevant sources (Moleong, 2014), including scientific books, national and international journal articles, policy documents, research reports, and other trustworthy sources that discuss topics related to the leadership of madrasah heads, change agents in education, and the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

The collected data is analyzed using a descriptive-qualitative approach to identify patterns, concepts, and theoretical findings that support (Rizki et al., 2023) deep understanding of the strategic role of madrasah heads in the context of educational management reform. The analysis is conducted using a thematic approach, grouping data based on emerging key themes such as transformational leadership styles, managerial change strategies, and challenges and opportunities in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* within madrasah environments.

Result and Discussion

The study results indicate that the headmaster plays a significant role in initiating, driving, and overseeing the educational management reform process based on the Merdeka Curriculum. The leadership of the headmaster is demonstrated through their ability to formulate a transformational vision, socialize curriculum changes to all members of the Madrasah.

1. Headmaster as an Agent of Change

The headmaster is positioned as the person who sets the center point and rhythm of the Madrasah's operations. Based on the study, the success in directing the Madrasah institution has been linked to the role played by the headmaster. As a senior leader, the headmaster is granted authority, power, and responsibility to design efficient leadership to manage and develop educators professionally. The research concludes that the success of a Madrasah is greatly influenced by the effectiveness of the headmaster's role. In this context,

the headmaster is considered one of the most important components in efforts to improve the quality of education (Latifah et al., 2021). Successful headmasters who act as agents of change generally apply participatory and transformational leadership approaches. They prioritize two-way communication, collaborative decision-making, and empower teachers to become more active in the development of differentiated learning. The implementation of education and teaching in Madrasah has been significantly influenced by the leadership of the headmaster, especially in the support given to teachers in achieving their goals. The teaching-learning process in Madrasah is affected by the quality of leadership demonstrated by the headmaster. The pattern or type of leadership exhibited by the headmaster in every activity is shaped by these conditions, and the effectiveness of leadership in the school environment is determined by this pattern. The crucial role in preparing the next generation to face the challenges of an ever-changing era is held by the active leadership of the headmaster. As a leader in education, an understanding of leadership theory is required, and its application in the workplace must be realized. In addition to mastery of theory and official recognition, the inherent leadership potential is also expected to be possessed by an educational leader (Apiyani, 2024).

The above statement shows that the leadership of the headmaster plays a strategic role in shaping a quality educational ecosystem in the Madrasah environment. The significant impact of leadership on the teaching and learning process emphasizes that the success of teachers in achieving learning goals highly depends on the type of support provided by the headmaster. The leadership pattern that emerges in Madrasah is not random but is a product of the interaction between leadership quality and institutional needs. Furthermore, the active leadership demonstrated by the headmaster is deemed crucial in preparing students to face the disruptions of the times, in line with the demands for curriculum adaptation and educational transformation in the Merdeka Curriculum era. Emphasizing an understanding of leadership theory and the ability to implement it indicates that educational leadership is not only technocratic but must also rely on the integration of knowledge, experience, and inherent leadership talent.

Thus, the headmaster is required to be a visionary, reflective, and transformative figure who not only navigates change but also drives the improvement of the quality of learning and the continuous professional development of teachers. As an educational leader, the headmaster must ensure that change is constantly pursued, and a continuous spirit of innovation is maintained to seek new breakthroughs. This is done to produce changes that are developmental and improvements so that concerning conditions can be transformed into more dynamic situations, both physically and academically. These changes include aspects of science, learning atmosphere, and teaching strategies that need to be continuously improved (Nasir et al., 2021). This statement affirms that the headmaster, as an educational leader, has a strategic responsibility in initiating and sustaining the change process within the educational institution. The changes referred to are not only structural or administrative but also touch on substantial aspects such as scientific development, improvement of the learning atmosphere, and enhancement of teaching strategies. The demand for the headmaster to always bring about innovation and new breakthroughs indicates that leadership in Madrasah is not static but dynamic and progressive. The ongoing spirit that the headmaster must possess is a form of commitment to educational reform, particularly in elevating the Madrasah from concerning conditions to more productive and adaptive situations in the face of changing times.

Thus, transformational leadership becomes an important characteristic that must be embedded in the headmaster's role. Not only as an administrative manager but also as an agent of change capable of orchestrating the institution's potential towards sustainable improvements in educational quality. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, this is

even more relevant because the curriculum change demands the institution's readiness to adapt creatively and responsively to the needs of students and society.

2. Headmaster's Strategy for Educational Management Reform

In order to realize the Merdeka Curriculum, the headmaster develops strategies for educational management reform through strengthening the planning system, implementation, and evaluation based on data and reflection. Innovations are made by developing a contextual operational curriculum (KOM), managing human resources based on competencies, and utilizing technology in the learning management process towards quality education.

Equitable and quality education is always desired by every country and society. However, many countries are unable to provide equitable access to education for all their citizens, and the quality of education offered is often still considered inadequate. Inequity and low-quality education are often viewed as causes of social disparities, injustice, and limited opportunities that individuals in society can enjoy. Moreover, the changes brought about by technological advancements and globalization have led to new demands on the educational system. Academic skills are no longer enough to be prepared through education; social skills, creativity, and critical thinking abilities also need to be nurtured to cope with the complexities of the modern world. Therefore, a paradigm shift in education is considered necessary to respond to these challenges. Education is also expected to be used as a means to create outstanding individuals capable of following developments in technology and information. As a result, a competitive, innovative, and capable society needs to be formed. Thus, the development of human resources quality must be prioritized. Improving human resource quality needs to be directed towards efforts to form critical awareness about life based on cultural values, both particular and universal (Khadijah & Puspita, 2023).

The headmaster also plays a role as a facilitator in providing training and ongoing professional development for teachers, as well as building partnerships with external parties to support the sustainability of creative and responsive learning programs for students' needs.

Challenges Faced by Headmasters in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Although many headmasters show initiative for change, research findings also indicate various structural and cultural challenges. Among them are teachers' limited understanding of the fundamental principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, resistance to changes in teaching methods, and limitations in resources, both financial and infrastructural.

In the framework of the Merdeka Belajar policy, efforts to instill Lifelong Learning Capacity (LLC) have become one of the strategic orientations that are very important, in line with the emergence of the 4th Industrial Revolution. LLC is positioned as a core competence that needs to be instilled from an early age in education. To support the development of this capacity, it has been emphasized that basic literacy and numeracy must be mastered first by students. Digital literacy and numeracy have been made the primary applicative media used to develop these abilities. However, in an increasingly developing digital environment, literacy and numeracy skills cannot be developed optimally if learning is still conducted through content-based approaches alone. Therefore, continuous training throughout the school period is necessary. In this context, basic skills such as fast comprehension reading, writing ideas in simple and polite language, quickly and accurately listening, and expressing ideas orally in a clear and polite manner are set as competences that need to be consistently trained. Additionally, skills in mathematics, including logic of numbers, areas, and space, are also used to sharpen students' thinking patterns in daily life practices (Rosyidi, 2020). Along with technological advancements,

developing a digital mindset is also considered important and integrated through digital literacy and numeracy. Mastery of numeracy, particularly in mathematics, has been used as an analytical tool to identify and understand various issues in students' surroundings. Thus, education is not only directed at mastering the material but also at creating critical and sustainable thinking abilities as part of lifelong learner profiles.

Successful headmasters are generally able to mitigate these challenges through strengthening internal communication, providing motivation and recognition for innovative teachers, and creating a learning ecosystem that supports the transformation process. The role of headmaster leadership (Mitrahardjo, 2020) in planning Madrasah programs based on the School-Based Management (MBS) approach has been realized through several strategic steps. First, the Madrasah vision and mission have been formulated and set as the direction for the institution's development. Next, Madrasah policies and institutional goals have been formulated and set, covering financial aspects and Madrasah programs. Madrasah program planning has also been designed based on the established vision, mission, goals, and strategic plans. Furthermore, resources have been determined and allocated systematically to support the implementation of the programs. Second, communication about the Madrasah programs based on MBS principles has been carried out by the headmaster through two main approaches. Internally, communication has been established by involving teachers and staff, such as providing opportunities for leadership roles in committees, activating Subject Teacher Consultation (MGMP), and involving teachers in training, seminars, or other capacity-building activities outside the school. Externally, communication has been established with the community and parents, such as inviting prospective students' parents at the beginning of the school year and proactively providing information through formal and informal forums. Additionally, based on field findings, the implementation of programs toward becoming a superior school has also been carried out by emphasizing effective communication, high discipline, and one-way command from the Education Office, to achieve the optimal goal of improving educational quality. Third, the control of Madrasah programs based on MBS has been carried out by the headmaster through the establishment of clear Madrasah standards. Monitoring and evaluation of program implementation have also been carried out routinely, both internally and externally, as well as supervision of subject teachers to ensure the overall quality of program implementation.

The statement shows that the leadership of the headmaster in the context of School-Based Management (MBS) is not only administrative but also strategic and participatory. The headmaster's role is demonstrated through the ability to plan, communicate, and control Madrasah programs systematically and structurally. In terms of planning, there is an orientation towards vision, mission, and strategic goals showing the long-term direction of the institution. Meanwhile, in communication, the internal and external approaches reflect a collaborative effort to build synergy between the school community and society. In the control process, activities such as monitoring, evaluation, and supervision become key instruments in maintaining the quality and effectiveness of the program. Field findings that highlight the importance of one-way communication from the Education Office also indicate the presence of structural intervention that may affect institutional autonomy. Overall, the effectiveness of the headmaster's leadership is crucial for the success of MBS implementation, both from a managerial perspective.

The findings above emphasize the critical role of the madrasah principal as a key player in the development and implementation of School-Based Management (MBS), which combines administrative, strategic, and participatory elements in managing a madrasah. The effectiveness of this leadership is not merely determined by administrative tasks but by how well the principal enacts a strategic vision that aligns with the long-term goals of

the institution, builds strong communication, and ensures the systematic monitoring of educational programs.

Conclusion

The study results indicate that the leadership of the madrasah principal plays a central role in initiating, driving, and overseeing the reform of education management based on the Merdeka Curriculum. The principal acts as an agent of change by implementing transformative and participative leadership, focusing not only on administrative aspects but also on substantive efforts to build a progressive and collaborative learning culture. The reform strategies include strengthening data-based planning, implementation, and evaluation systems; developing contextual curricula; managing human resources based on competencies; and integrating technology into managerial and learning processes.

On the other hand, madrasah principals also face structural and cultural challenges, such as teacher resistance, limited understanding of the curriculum, and resource constraints. However, these challenges can be mitigated through effective communication, teacher empowerment, and the creation of an adaptive and sustainable learning ecosystem. In this context, principals are required to continuously innovate, reflect, and maintain a spirit of change to ensure that the quality of madrasah education meets the demands of the times and produces graduates who are competent, critical, and of strong character.

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