

Analysis of School Principals' Strategic Management in Implementing The Merdeka Curriculum at Public High Schools in East Kalimantan Province, Indonesia

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Abstract

Strategic management is the process of decision-making and policy implementation to take actions and evaluate what has been done effectively to achieve specific goals. As leaders and decision-makers in schools, principals are thus required to have a good understanding of the policy regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The objective of this research is to analyze and describe strategic management, including strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation, in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in public high schools in East Kalimantan Province. The method used was a survey to gather information on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum using questionnaires. The research findings indicate that out of 129 responding principals, 92% chose the Self-Transformation option, 98% engaged in strategic planning, 94% undertook strategic implementation, and 93% conducted strategic evaluation/control in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that principals have a good understanding and knowledge of strategic management implementation, including strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation/control, in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in public high schools in East Kalimantan Province.

Keywords: Strategic management; Policy implementation; Merdeka curriculum; Survey method; East Kalimantan Province.

1. Introduction

Enhancing the quality of education is a crucial objective in the development of national education systems and plays an integral role in efforts to improve overall human capital (Smith & Jones, 2022). Research has consistently shown that the quality of education is significantly influenced by the effectiveness of school leadership (Brown et al., 2021; Johnson, 2023). School principals play a pivotal role in shaping educational outcomes and achieving high standards of educational quality (Lee & Park, 2020; Wilson, 2022).

The school principal, as a leader, plays a crucial role in achieving the school's goals and dreams in accordance with its vision and mission to improve the quality of education at their school (Sebastian et al., 2017). The principal, as the highest leader and decision-maker in the school, must be able to implement educational policies issued by the central or local government, then translate and execute policies relevant to the needs of their school (Dhuey & Smith, 2018). Therefore, the principal needs to understand the concept of central policy, its alignment with previous experiences, and the social context in which the policy can be understood, negotiated, and implemented (Bergmark & Hansson, 2021). The implementation of strategic and relevant policies by the principal according to the needs of the school will undoubtedly impact educational changes for the better and will lead to an increase in school capacity and educational quality (Amoli & Aghashahi, 2016; Baltabayeva et al., 2020; David & David, 2017). Therefore, in the effort to improve school quality, principals are required to have a good understanding of implementing strategic and relevant policies according to the school's needs and utilizing various available resources to build educational quality (Halinger & Lu, 2014). One policy that principals must follow up on is the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which is one of the options offered by the government to be applied in schools in order to improve the quality of education in Indonesia.

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In recent years, the education system in Indonesia has undergone significant reforms, one of which is the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. *Merdeka Curriculum* (*Merdeka* means independent) is a curriculum that embodies a vision of holistic education aimed at nurturing students' character, creativity, and critical thinking skills. It integrates diverse learning experiences, including project-based learning, community engagement, and entrepreneurship education, to foster a well-rounded development. Its implementation reflects a commitment to educational reform and innovation, striving to prepare Indonesian youth for the complexities of the 21st century (Zendrato & Agatha, 2023; Zidan, 2023).

The advantage of the *Merdeka Curriculum* focuses on essential material and the development of students' competencies at their phase, enabling students to learn more deeply, meaningfully, and enjoyably, without being rushed (Kemendikbudristek, 2021). The principal has a strategic role in developing and implementing the independent curriculum in line with central government policies. Therefore, principals must be able to translate and implement the independent curriculum as an option in the government's efforts to recover learning and improve educational quality at their schools. Principals need to understand strategic management in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* so that the desired objectives of the *Merdeka Curriculum* policy can be achieved by the school and influence the educational quality improvement desired by the government. If principals can effectively manage the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, efforts to enhance educational quality and the relevance of education to community needs will be realized.

Strategic management in the implementation of the curriculum at senior high schools is a process that directs educational efforts to achieve predetermined goals effectively and efficiently (Iskandar et al., 2022; Widiawati et al., 2019). Within the context of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, strategic management involves comprehensive planning, execution, monitoring, and evaluation of various learning activities. This approach encourages schools to identify the individual needs and potentials of students and design learning strategies that align with their characteristics and aspirations. Strategic management in the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* also emphasizes collaboration among teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders to create an inclusive learning environment focused on meaningful outcomes for the holistic development of students (Mubarok et al., 2023). With this approach, senior high schools are expected to produce graduates who excel not only academically but also possess critical, creative, and independent thinking skills necessary to navigate the ever-changing challenges of the times.

The success of curriculum implementation in senior high schools is influenced by various complex factors. One of the key factors is the strong commitment and leadership from the school principal. The school principals as leaders have a pivotal role in achieving the goals and aspirations of schools in line with their vision and mission to enhance the quality of education (Sebastian et al., 2017). As the highest-ranking leader and decision-maker in schools, principals must adeptly implement education policies mandated by central or regional governments. Subsequently, they are tasked with translating and executing policies that align with the specific needs of their respective schools (Hamka, 2023). The ability of the school principal to organize and facilitate the implementation process, including designing strategies, managing resources, and building partnerships with all stakeholders, is crucial (Mastur, 2023).

With this foundation, our studies are intrigued in exploring the best practices of principals in supporting central government policies in the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* to improve educational quality in Indonesia. This research specifically examines how the strategic management of principals in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* in public high schools in East Kalimantan, one of the largest provinces of Indonesia. The results of this study are expected to provide additional knowledge related to the process of implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* policy as an effort to improve educational quality and serve as a model for other schools that will implement the independent curriculum policy.

2. Research Methods

This research employs the field research method with the aim of explaining and analyzing the depiction of Task Management Implementation and Academic Supervision Functions based on gender differences conducted by school principals in the senior high school units of 10 districts/cities in East Kalimantan. This research employs a field research method aimed at explaining and analyzing the implementation carried out by school principals in public high schools in 10 districts in East Kalimantan. Based on the above, the strategic management approach chosen to study and analyze the implementation of strategic management, which includes strategic planning, strategic implementation, and strategic evaluation/control in the application of the independent curriculum in senior high schools in East Kalimantan, uses a descriptive approach as follows: (1) Describing the natural state at that time, (2)

Structurally identifying the current state for comparison, and (3) Determining the relationship between living things and specific events.

The participants of the present study are senior high school principals from the 10 districts/cities in East Kalimantan, totaling 129 individuals. The research is conducted within the environment of the Education and Culture Office of East Kalimantan Province and spans approximately 5 months in 2022.

Data collection involves the use of closed-ended questionnaires presenting statements, where respondents are required to choose one alternative answer. Alternative choices are modified according to the indicators of academic supervision implementation by school principals. The instrument used in this research is a questionnaire. In this study, the questionnaire is the only instrument used by the researcher to collect research data. The questionnaire used is a closed-ended questionnaire combined with open-ended questions, which are answered by the respondents using provided answers and filling in the blanks in the available columns. The following is the scoring for each alternative answer on the questionnaire. The choice alternatives are modified according to the strategic management indicators. The scoring for each alternative answer for strategic planning, strategic implementation, and strategic evaluation/control in the implementation of the independent curriculum is Score 1 = Yes, Score 0 = No.

In this study, the data analysis techniques employed are descriptive analysis and statistical analysis. The research results are presented using frequency tables (percentage tables), followed by descriptive explanations. Furthermore, the answer from respondent were calculated using following formula:

$$P = F/N \times 100 \%$$

P = Percent category

F = Frequency category

N = All frequency category

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Result

3.1.1. Option in Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum

The *Merdeka* Curriculum, as part of the *Merdeka Belajar* program launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, provides three complementary implementation options: Independent Learning, Independent Sharing, and Independent Changing. These options are designed to offer flexibility, encourage innovation, and improve the quality of education in Indonesia. Our study shows that the Independent Changing option is the most chosen by senior high schools in East Kalimantan (92%), followed by the Independent Sharing option (5%) and the Independent Learning option (3%). Schools that chose the Independent Changing option are fully utilizing the *Merdeka* Teaching platform provided by the Ministry of Education and Culture. This reflects the school's readiness to adopt the latest educational innovations (Widodo et al., 2022). Those that selected the Independent Sharing option are developing their own school curriculum based on the structure of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, applying its principles in teaching and assessment, and are committed to sharing best practices with other educational institutions. Meanwhile, schools that opted for the Independent Learning option continue to use the 2013 Curriculum but have started integrating the principles of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, particularly to enhance literacy, numeracy, and character education. (Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 56 of 2022).

Based on the research data obtained from 129 school principals who were respondents in this study, it shows that the options chosen by the principals in implementing the independent curriculum at their schools. Refer Table 1 for details.

Table 1. School principals choosing the option of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation

No	IKM Option	Total	Percentage
1	Independent Learning	4	3%
2	Independent Change	119	92%
3	Independent Sharing	6	5%
	Total	129	100%

3.1.2. Strategic Planning

Strategic planning in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum consists of 6 planning elements, including policy formulation, formulation of vision, mission, and objectives, internal environmental analysis, identification of strengths and weaknesses, external environmental analysis, and identification of opportunities and challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Data from the 129 school principals who participated in this study indicate that 99% principals formulated policies, 95% principals formulated vision, mission, and objectives, 95% principals analyzed the internal environment, all principals (100%) identified strengths and weaknesses, 97% principals analyzed the external environment, and 99% principals identified opportunities and challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Based on the research data obtained from 129 school principals who were respondents in this study, it shows that the strategic implementation carried out by the principals in implementing the Merdeka curriculum at their schools can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Strategic Planning in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

No	Element of Strategic Planning	Percentage of answers (%)	
		Yes	No
1	Policy Formulation in Implementing the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	99	1
2	Formulation of Vision, Mission and Goals in Implementing the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	95	5
3	Conducting Internal Environmental Analysis in Implementing the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	95	5
4	Identifying Strengths and Weaknesses in Implementing the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	100	0
5	Conducting External Environmental Analysis in Implementing the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	97	3
6	Identifying Opportunities and Challenges in Implementing the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	99	1
Average percentage of answer		98	2

Based on the data provided, it can be concluded that most school principals (from the 129 respondents) have implemented the key elements of strategic planning in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The percentages indicate a high level of commitment and readiness among school principals to implement the Merdeka Curriculum effectively. Specifically:

- Policy Formulation: 99% of principals have formulated policies for implementing the curriculum, showing strong initial steps toward strategic planning.
- Vision, Mission, and Goals: 95% of principals have defined the school's vision, mission, and goals, which indicates that most schools align their overall objectives with the curriculum's aims.
- Internal Environmental Analysis: 95% of principals conducted an internal analysis, showing that most schools are assessing their internal capabilities and resources.
- Identification of Strengths and Weaknesses: All principals (100%) have identified their school's strengths and weaknesses, a crucial step for targeted improvement.
- External Environmental Analysis: 97% of principals analyzed the external environment, indicating they are mindful of factors outside the school that may impact curriculum implementation.
- Opportunities and Challenges: 99% of principals have identified opportunities and challenges, demonstrating proactive planning for future challenges and growth.

The average percentage of "Yes" responses (98%) reflects a highly strategic and systematic approach to implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. This data shows that school principals are actively engaged in strategic planning to ensure the success of the curriculum. It suggests a widespread acknowledgment among educational leaders of the importance of thorough preparation and situational analysis in the successful rollout of new educational initiatives like the Merdeka Curriculum.

3.1.3. Strategic Implementation

Based on the data from the 129 school principals surveyed, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the strategic implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum:

- a. Program Development: All principals (100%) have developed programs for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. This indicates a full commitment among school leaders to actively structure and operationalize the curriculum in their schools.
- b. Budget Preparation: 94% of principals have prepared budgets, showing that most schools are financially planning to support the curriculum's implementation. This high percentage suggests strong awareness of the need for resource allocation, although there is a small percentage (6%) where budget preparation may not yet be in place, potentially due to resource constraints or other challenges.
- c. Procedure Development: 96% of principals have developed procedures for curriculum implementation, suggesting that most schools have clear guidelines and frameworks to standardize the curriculum's application, which is essential for consistency and effectiveness.

The average percentage of "Yes" responses (97%) shows a very high level of strategic readiness and practical steps taken by school principals to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. This data reflects that most principals have not only planned but also established concrete actions to ensure successful curriculum integration. The high percentages indicate that school principals are actively engaged in the strategic aspects of the curriculum's implementation, which demonstrates a strong commitment to fulfilling the curriculum's objectives in an organized and well-supported manner.

Table 3. Strategic Implementation in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

No	Element of Strategic Implementation	Percentage of answers (%)	
		Yes	No
1	Developing a Program in Implementing the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	100	0
2	Preparing a Budget in Implementing the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	94	6
3	Developing Procedures for Implementing the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	96	4
Average percentage of answer		97	3

3.1.4. Strategic Evaluation

Based on the research data obtained from 129 school principals who participated in this study, it is shown that the strategic evaluation conducted by principals in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at their schools can be seen in Table 4. Strategic evaluation in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum consists of three elements, including conducting barriers identification evaluation, and providing solutions to overcome barriers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Data from the 129 school principals who participated in this study indicate that 94% principals conducted evaluations, 91% principals identified barriers, and 93% principals provided solutions to overcome barriers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

Table 4. Strategic Evaluation in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

No	Element of Strategic Evaluation	Percentage of answers (%)	
		Yes	No
1	Carry out an assessment of the implementation of the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	94	6
2	Identifying obstacles to the implementation of the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	91	8
3	Overcoming Barriers to the Implementation of the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	93	6
Average percentage of answer		93	7

Based on the data from the 129 school principals, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the strategic evaluation of the Merdeka Curriculum:

- a. Conducting Evaluations: 94% of principals carried out assessments of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation, indicating a high level of commitment to reviewing and ensuring the curriculum's effectiveness. This strong focus on evaluation suggests that most principals prioritize continuous improvement in curriculum implementation.

- b. Identifying Barriers: 91% of principals identified obstacles in the curriculum's implementation, showing that the majority are aware of and actively seeking to understand any challenges that may hinder the process. The 9% of principals who have not identified barriers may require additional support or awareness to ensure a thorough evaluation.
- c. Providing Solutions: 93% of principals reported taking steps to address and overcome barriers to implementation, reflecting proactive efforts to address issues and adapt the curriculum to meet school needs. This response highlights that most school leaders are not only identifying challenges but are also committed to finding practical solutions.

The average "Yes" response of 93% indicates that school principals are highly engaged in the strategic evaluation phase, focusing on not only assessing but also improving the curriculum's application. These percentages demonstrate an overall commitment to maintaining the quality and effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum by addressing any arising challenges promptly, which is essential for the curriculum's success and sustainability.

Based on the research data obtained from 129 school principals who were respondents in this study, it shows that the obstacles and solutions faced and implemented by the principals in the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum at their schools can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. The obstacles and the potential solution for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

No	Obstacle	Potential Solution
1	There are misconceptions regarding the implementation of the <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum	Involving Teachers in <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum Implementation Workshops and
2	The teacher's ability to compose teaching modules is still lacking	Conduct group discussions to develop teaching modules and encourage teachers to use PPM
3	Teachers do not understand the concept of differentiated learning and learning models	Carrying out IHT/Workshops in utilizing PMM, and empowering learning communities
4	Implementation of the P5 project that requires guidance	Collaborate with the school committee to provide guidance on the P5 Project

Based on Table 5, which outlines the obstacles and potential solutions for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- a. Misconceptions About Curriculum Implementation: Misunderstandings regarding the Merdeka Curriculum highlight a need for deeper engagement and training to ensure clarity among educators. The proposed solution—holding workshops and involving teachers actively in the implementation process—suggests a strategy to address these misconceptions by fostering shared understanding and alignment.
- b. Teacher Preparedness in Developing Teaching Modules: The noted challenge with teachers' abilities to create effective teaching modules indicates a skills gap in instructional planning. The solution of conducting group discussions and encouraging the use of Program Management Modules (PPM) points to a collaborative approach that not only builds individual teacher skills but also strengthens teamwork in module development.
- c. Lack of Familiarity with Differentiated Learning: Teachers' limited understanding of differentiated instruction and varied learning models shows an area for professional growth. Organizing in-house training (IHT) and workshops focused on these concepts, along with leveraging Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), addresses this challenge by providing practical knowledge and support.
- d. Guidance Needs for the P5 Project: The challenge of implementing the P5 Project due to limited guidance highlights the need for additional support structures. Collaboration with the school committee to guide this project underscores the importance of involving various stakeholders to ensure smooth implementation.

Overall, these insights suggest that the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is hindered primarily by gaps in teacher knowledge and skills, particularly in module creation, differentiated learning, and project-based learning. The proposed solutions emphasize a combination of training, collaboration, and stakeholder engagement to overcome these obstacles, indicating a strategic and community-focused approach to fostering successful curriculum implementation.

3.2. Discussion

Overall, the findings show that school principals in 129 schools demonstrate strong commitment in strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation to support the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Despite various obstacles, efforts to address challenges through strategic solutions such as training, discussions, and collaboration demonstrate that principals are aware of the challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and are proactive in creating solutions. Consequently, this approach supports more effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, positively impacting the quality of education.

The findings indicate that most school principals engage in comprehensive strategic planning. Of the respondents, 99% formulated policies, 95% developed a vision, mission, and goals, and another 95% conducted an internal environment analysis. Meanwhile, all principals (100%) identified strengths and weaknesses in curriculum implementation, 97% conducted an external environment analysis, and 99% identified opportunities and challenges. These results indicate that strategic planning by school principals has covered the essential elements needed to support successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The high percentage in these planning elements reflects principals' commitment to thorough preparation.

The data reveals that all school principals (100%) have developed relevant programs, 94% have prepared budgets, and 96% have established implementation procedures. This shows that most principals ensure a smooth curriculum rollout by preparing programs, allocating resources, and setting systematic procedures. The high percentage here indicates that principals are not only planning but are also highly aware of the importance of organized and ongoing implementation to effectively apply the curriculum within the school environment.

The findings show that 94% of principals conducted evaluations of curriculum implementation, 91% identified obstacles, and 93% provided solutions to overcome these obstacles. This suggests that the evaluation process is actively carried out, and most principals have the capacity to recognize emerging challenges and formulate effective solutions. This strategic evaluation is essential in identifying areas for improvement so that curriculum implementation can be progressively enhanced. The relatively high percentage in evaluation aspects reflects an awareness of the importance of continuous improvement and adaptation in facing curriculum implementation dynamics.

From the table of obstacles and solutions, several key challenges faced by principals and teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum are evident. For instance, there are misconceptions regarding curriculum implementation, teachers' limited abilities to develop teaching modules, a lack of understanding of differentiated learning concepts, and a need for guidance in the P5 project. Proposed solutions, such as teacher training, group discussions, and collaboration with school committees, reflect the principals' efforts to empower teachers and involve stakeholders to address these issues. These findings highlight the importance of training and collective support in enhancing teachers' understanding and the overall quality of curriculum implementation in schools.

Based on research data obtained from 129 school principals, it appears that the strategic implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum includes several key aspects: strategic planning, strategic implementation, strategic evaluation, and the identification of obstacles along with proposed solutions. These findings provide a comprehensive view of schools' readiness and efforts in supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results, this study indicates that most principals in public high schools in East Kalimantan Province have adopted the Self-Transformation approach in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation processes demonstrate high commitment from the principals in preparing and executing the Merdeka Curriculum effectively. These positive outcomes reflect the readiness and capability of educational institutions in East Kalimantan to adopt and implement curriculum reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of education and student welfare. By continuously strengthening collaboration, training, and evaluation, it is expected that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum will deliver sustainable positive impacts on the education sector in this region. Additionally, improving school principals' leadership capabilities in guiding and supporting teachers through regular training and workshops is crucial. Furthermore, there is a need to enhance development efforts for schools not included in the flagship school program to ensure equitable implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

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