The Role, Strategies, and Innovations of School Principals as Change Leaders in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

*Nola Nari [1], Christina Khaidir [2], Yudabbirul Arif [3], Nurhizrah Gistituati [3], Rusdinal [3]

[1]Doctoral Program of Education Science – Postgraduate School, Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang; and FTIK, UIN Mahmud Yunus, Batusangkar, Indonesia
[2]Doctoral Program of Education Science – Postgraduate School, Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang; FTK, UIN Imam Bonjol, Padang, Indonesia
[3]Doctoral Program of Education Science – Postgraduate School, Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang, Indonesia
*E-mail: nolanari84@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of school principals as change leaders in implementing the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia. It explores their strategies, innovative practices, and the factors contributing to both the successes and challenges of curriculum application. Adopting a qualitative methodology, data were gathered through purposive sampling, with school principals serving as primary informants. The findings reveal that principals are instrumental in driving curriculum reform by engaging in academic supervision, cultivating collaborative school environments, and promoting student-centered learning approaches. Key strategies identified include organizing professional development initiatives, fostering stakeholder partnerships, and efficiently managing resources to align teaching methodologies with the curriculum's objectives. Innovative practices, such as establishing professional learning communities and introducing project-based learning activities, further facilitate the curriculum's adoption. The study identifies several factors that support the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, including active teacher involvement, government-sponsored training programs, and curriculum designs tailored to local contexts. The study highlights the critical need for continuous professional development, comprehensive strategic planning, and consistent policy support to overcome these obstacles. Effective leadership by school principals is essential for fostering a positive school culture and encouraging collaboration among stakeholders, thereby enabling systemic transformation.

Keywords: Curriculum, Leadership, Educational, Transformation, Professional development.

INTRODUCTION

After Nadiem Makarim's inauguration as the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology on October 23, 2019, he introduced several policies and innovative programs to enhance education in Indonesia (Sumarsih *et al*., 2022). One of these initiatives is the Independent Curriculum Program. Nova *et al* (2020) state that the Independent Curriculum emphasizes extracurricular learning, allowing students ample time to explore concepts and strengthen their competencies.

Curriculum changes bring educational units into competitive environments, requiring adjustments in organizational design, structure, and leadership. Chandra *et al* (2021) stated that leadership can drive and support creativity to help followers and organizations more

easily accept and adapt to change. Similarly, Bishop (2001) argued that leadership facilitates, supports, and develops the capacity for transformation. The stronger an individual's leadership in driving organizational change, the higher the likelihood of achieving successful transformation. Conversely, weaker leadership results in lower organizational change achievements (Khilal, 2016).

One of the key advantages of implementing the Independent Curriculum is its relevance and interactivity. Learning through project-based activities provides students with broader opportunities to actively explore real-world issues such as the environment, health, and other relevant topics. This approach supports the development of character and competencies aligned with the Pancasila student profile (Nisa', 2022). Critical aspects for leaders aiming to achieve changes in line with the Pancasila student profile include: possessing credibility and reputation to inspire and motivate; recognizing that change starts within individuals; fostering enthusiasm for transformation across the organization; effectively utilizing themes of change; inspiring resilience when facing challenges; guiding focused actions to improve performance; using straightforward and clear models of thought; and remaining steadfast in executing and advancing organizational transformations. According to Schmid (2010), organizational change involves modifications to structural organization, technology, tasks, and human resources.

When curriculum changes yield positive outcomes, they must be integrated into the organization's culture to ensure sustainability. Khilal (2016) emphasized that preserving changes requires not only technical adaptations but also personal approaches, such as improving interactions with students, partners, lecturers, and other stakeholders within educational institutions (Priansa, 2020; Rojuanlah, 2012; Akbar, 2018).

Given the aforementioned challenges, it is essential to analyze the roles, strategies, and innovations implemented by school leaders in applying the Independent Curriculum, along with identifying the supporting and inhibiting factors in its execution. Field data gathered can contribute to efforts to strengthen and continuously improve the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. This study aims to explore the role of school principals as change leaders, their strategies and innovations in driving transformation, and the factors that support or hinder the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

METHOD

The method applied in this study follows a qualitative approach, with the study categorized as content analysis. This study was conducted by naturally constructing and describing the concepts under investigation while considering the facts observed in the field. The chosen informants were those capable of providing insights into the successful strategies employed by school principals in implementing the Independent Curriculum.

Data collection was conducted through interviews with school principals actively involved in the Independent Curriculum implementation. The data analysis process was guided by the Miles and Huberman model. To enhance the validity of the data, the studies employed techniques such as deepening their understanding of the program and verifying the accuracy of documents related to the Independent Curriculum implementation, including teacher activation initiatives promoted by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Setyono & Widodo, 2019).

The stages of data analysis undertaken by the studies include the following steps:

– Data Reduction: Data reduction involves organizing and grouping the collected data in a manner that allows conclusions (verification) to be drawn. Field data were meticulously recorded in detail and systematically immediately following each data collection session. The reports were then refined by focusing on key areas relevant to the study's objectives, making it easier to synthesize the findings. This step aids studies in identifying specific aspects of the data for coding and retrieval as needed.

– Data Display: The next stage involves presenting the data in an organized manner, which facilitates drawing conclusions and determining subsequent actions. Data can be displayed in narrative text or visual formats such as matrices, graphs, or diagrams. This organization ensures studies remain focused and do not become overwhelmed by excessive amounts of data. By presenting data effectively, studies gain a clearer understanding of what has occurred and what steps should follow.

– Verification: The final stage involves synthesizing the data and validating findings. Qualitative study requires iterative review throughout the study to ensure the conclusions are accurate and valid. Verification entails revisiting notes, identifying patterns, themes, relationships, and consistencies, and then formulating conclusions based on these observations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study findings obtained from various sources and information from informants are described below, focusing on the roles, strategies, and innovations carried out by school principals in applying the Independent Curriculum, as well as the supporting and inhibiting factors in its implementation.

3.1 Study Results

Interviews with the principals of Islamic Junior High School (IJHS) 11 Pesisir Selatan and Junior High School (JHS) 12 Solok Selatan revealed the following results:

The Role of the Principal in Implementing the Independent Curriculum

The principal plays a central role as the leader and driving force behind the successful application of the Independent Curriculum. This role is executed through the following actions: 1) Principals prioritize academic supervision as a reflective tool to assess and improve the teaching and learning environment within their schools; 2) By directly participating in the curriculum design process, principals ensure alignment with the institution's goals and foster a collaborative environment among teaching and educational staff; 3) Principals encourage educators to shift their focus toward student-centered approaches that prioritize active participation and exploration by students; and 4) Principals support teachers and staff by granting them autonomy and independence in developing innovative teaching strategies that align with the Independent Curriculum framework. These roles are not only instrumental in shaping the curriculum but also contribute to enhancing the overall quality of education provided by the institution.

The Principal's Strategy in Implementing the Independent Curriculum

Strategic planning is crucial for the effective implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The strategies employed by principals and teachers include: 1) Utilizing resources provided on this platform to understand the curriculum's objectives and methodologies; 2) Engaging in professional development through webinars and workshops designed to deepen understanding of the Independent Curriculum; 3) Establishing and participating in communities where educators can share experiences, challenges, and best practices; 4) Drawing insights from recommended materials and case studies to adopt effective teaching methods; 5) Accessing guidance and technical support for addressing challenges in curriculum implementation; and 6) Collaborating with external organizations to gain additional resources and expertise in applying the curriculum effectively. These strategies demonstrate a multi-faceted approach to addressing the complexities of curriculum reform and ensuring its seamless integration into school operations.

Innovations by the Principal in Implementing the Independent Curriculum

Principals have introduced a range of innovative practices to enhance the Independent Curriculum's implementation, which include: 1) Establishing a dedicated team to plan and execute curriculum-related projects effectively; 2) Overseeing projects that align with the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening initiative while managing resources transparently and accountably; 3) Fostering partnerships among parents, educational staff, and external stakeholders, such as community organizations, universities, and practitioners; 4) Creating professional learning communities within the school to continuously improve educator competencies and support peer collaboration; 5) Providing structured coaching sessions to prepare educators for projects that enhance the Pancasila student profile; 6) Designing and Implementing P5 Projects: Examples include: Entrepreneurship Activities, Sound Democracy Initiatives, and Spiritual and Cultural Activities. These innovations demonstrate the principals' ability to adapt to the curriculum's requirements while fostering an environment conducive to holistic student development.

Supporting Factors in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

Several factors contribute to the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum: 1) Teachers and schools are deeply involved in designing and adapting curricula to local contexts, ensuring relevance and effectiveness; 2) Platforms such as Merdeka Learning provide teachers with the tools and knowledge necessary to develop and implement the curriculum effectively; 3) The curriculum supports the use of diverse instructional materials tailored to the cultural and environmental contexts of the schools; 4) Regular assessments of the curriculum's effectiveness ensure it remains aligned with local needs and achieves desired learning outcomes; 5) Teachers trained through government programs act as champions of the curriculum, providing guidance and inspiration to their peers. These factors highlight the collaborative and adaptive nature of successful curriculum implementation.

Obstacles in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

Despite the supportive measures, several challenges hinder the implementation of the Independent Curriculum: 1) Many educators require further training to acquire the necessary skills and confidence to implement the curriculum; 2) A lack of resources, such

as teaching aids and technological tools, poses significant challenges for schools; 3) Frequent policy changes create confusion and disrupt the consistency required for successful curriculum application; 4) Some teachers struggle with using technology, which is essential for effectively integrating the curriculum into their teaching practices. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, including training programs, resource allocation, and consistent policy support.

The findings underscore the pivotal role of school principals as change leaders in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Their strategic planning, innovative approaches, and adaptability are critical to overcoming challenges and ensuring the curriculum's success. However, continuous support from the government, provision of resources, and consistent professional development for teachers are essential for achieving sustainable improvements in the education system.

3.2 Discussions

Quality culture refers to a shared system of meaning among members of an organization that distinguishes it from others. This shared system encompasses key characteristics highly valued by the organization or school. In the context of schools, quality culture represents a blend of values, beliefs, assumptions, understandings, and expectations held by school members, serving as a guide for behavior and addressing both internal and external challenges. The effectiveness of a quality culture depends on the ability of leaders, particularly principals, to leverage both hard system tools (e.g., strategies, structure, and systems) and soft system tools (e.g., shared values, staff, skills, and leadership styles). When the quality culture fails to align with common goals, leaders must take corrective action to address the issue (Said, 2018).

The factors supporting change within schools include internal elements (e.g., principal leadership, foundation support, and infrastructure) and external elements (e.g., societal demand for education and competition among schools). Conversely, barriers to change often stem from teachers' resistance to adopting new mindsets, low competence levels among educators, and the negative public image of the school (Zahro *et al.*, 2018).

A principal plays a pivotal role as a school leader with additional responsibilities, particularly in developing a positive school culture. School culture comprises a set of values that influence behavior, traditions, daily habits, and symbols practiced by school stakeholders, including principals, teachers, administrative staff, students, and the surrounding community. The development of this culture depends heavily on the principal's leadership in uniting educators, students, and school staff toward shared goals (Syamsuddin, 2020). As instructional leaders, principals have driven continuous improvement. However, there is now a pressing need to view principals as leaders of change, capable of fostering sustainable transformation at scale. This requires system-wide collaboration involving schools, communities, districts, and state-level policies to elevate the teaching profession and encourage broader cultural shifts in education (Fullan, 2002).

Effective leadership by school principals can significantly enhance the quality of education. By enforcing discipline among students and introducing innovative programs, principals can create a better learning environment. Strong leadership directly correlates with higher educational standards (Sari *et al.*, 2021).

The appointment of Nadiem Makarim as Minister of Education and Culture marked a pivotal shift in Indonesia's education system, introducing new policies aimed at improving

educational quality. Recognizing Indonesia's relatively low educational standards compared to rapidly developing nations, Makarim's policies emphasize transformational initiatives such as "driving schools". These initiatives focus on fostering student-centered learning through microlearning approaches tailored to individual talents and interests. The goal is to create Pancasila students who are critical thinkers, creative, independent, collaborative, globally aware, and morally grounded. Principals in driving schools serve as facilitators for teachers and catalysts for school-wide change (Mariana, 2021).

Schools must respond to environmental changes and anticipate future challenges to remain competitive. Change involves transitioning from the current state to an improved future state that aligns with organizational goals. Principals play a crucial role as the driving force behind these changes, acting as managers of educational institutions and ensuring effective performance through strategic policies (Danim, 2002).

The successful implementation of educational programs in schools depends on interdependent components, including teachers, students, curriculum, and infrastructure. According to Usman (2009), achieving organizational goals requires optimizing resources such as funding, information, infrastructure, and human capital. Principals must employ strategic, planned programs to help schools realize their vision, mission, and objectives (Owen, 1998). Adequate facilities and infrastructure, along with innovative management practices, are critical for ensuring effective teaching and learning. Supporting factors for school improvement include the high educational qualifications of teaching staff (e.g., most hold bachelor's degrees), which align with professional demands for educators to meet modern standards. The Regulation of the Minister of National Education No. 28/2010 highlights the professional role of teachers in guiding, assessing, and educating students at all levels of formal education. The government also facilitates continuous professional development (CPD) activities with adequate resources and support from various stakeholders, including financial, policy, and infrastructure assistance (Ardiansyah *et al*., 2022; Rahyasih *et al*., 2020). Teachers' professionalism is reflected in their competencies and adherence to ethical standards (Danim, 2010).

However, some challenges hinder principals from effectively leading change. These include the aging teaching workforce nearing retirement and a shortage of qualified teachers, which contrast sharply with the expectations of becoming high-achieving schools. Kaufman (1993) identified common failure factors in organizational change: 1) resistance to disrupting existing group dynamics; 2) opposition from internal or external groups; and 3) an inability to implement necessary changes.

CONCLUSIONS

The study findings underscore the critical role of school principals in successfully implementing the Independent Curriculum, highlighting their leadership, strategies, and innovative approaches. Principals serve as pivotal change agents, spearheading curriculum reform through academic supervision, fostering collaborative school environments, and promoting student-centered learning methodologies. Their strategic initiatives, including the establishment of professional learning communities, engagement with stakeholders, and structured coaching programs, have played a key role in facilitating the curriculum's effective adoption. Several supporting factors contribute to the success of this

implementation, such as active teacher participation in curriculum design, government-provided training platforms, and the contextual alignment of instructional materials with local needs. Nevertheless, the process faces challenges, including inadequate resources, limited training opportunities, and resistance to change among educators. To address these barriers, prioritizing continuous professional development, increasing resource allocation, and ensuring consistent policy support are imperative. Strong and effective leadership by principals not only enhances educational quality but also nurtures a positive and supportive school culture. This culture, characterized by shared values and collective objectives, serves as a foundation for sustainable transformation within the education system. Principals must adeptly balance their dual roles as instructional leaders and agents of change, fostering collaboration with communities and policymakers to achieve systemic advancements. The findings emphasize the significance of innovative management practices, strategic resource utilization, and cooperative efforts in realizing the vision of a modern and effective education system. As Indonesia's education landscape evolves under transformative policies such as the Independent Curriculum, the leadership of school principals remains integral to driving impactful and enduring progress.

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