Principal Leadership in Implementing Independent Learning to Increase Teacher Awareness

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	Much research has addressed educational leadership and the implementation of new policies, but few have specifically examined how principal leadership directly influences teacher awareness. Therefore, the intent of this study was to examine the role of principals in increasing teacher awareness regarding the implementation of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn). Based on the educational transformation towards autonomous learning, this study analyzed successful leadership strategies. This type of research is a combination of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview, observation) methods. The results indicate that professional support, principal capacity building, and transformational leadership significantly improved teacher understanding and commitment. Principals successfully transformed teachers' roles into facilitators by serving as role models, inspiring, stimulating intellectually, and providing individualized attention. They also facilitated workshops and coaching. This research contributes to the development of educational leadership and pedagogical models and provides practical suggestions for teacher and principal development programs that support an adaptive, science-and-technology-based education ecosystem.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is crucial for developing quality human resources, and in today's era of globalization, the need for a flexible and innovative education system is increasing (Malik, 2018; Ke et al., 2019; Dung, 2021). The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture has proposed the concept of "Merdeka Belajar," a new paradigm that emphasizes the relevance of learning, autonomy, and creativity. The goal of this program is to transform the educational ecosystem into a more dynamic one (Yudhawasthi & Christiani, 2021). They hope that teachers and students will have more freedom to choose courses and learning methods that align with their potential and needs (Ledger et al., 2016). Leadership at the school level is crucial as a driver of change and innovation in such situations. As the highest leader in an educational institution, the

principal holds strategic control in directing, motivating, and ensuring the effective implementation of educational policies, such as the philosophy of "free learning."

Implementing "free learning" goes beyond simply changing the curriculum or teaching methods; it represents a fundamental transformation in perspectives on the educational process (Ismaya et al., 2021; Sihombing et al., 2021). The success of this initiative depends heavily on teachers' readiness to adopt a new, student-centered approach, encouraging exploration, and facilitating meaningful learning. However, changing long-standing mindsets and habits requires comprehensive efforts and strong leadership (Aldholay et al., 2018). This study will explore various ways in which principal leadership can facilitate this transition, not only by providing administrative instruction but also by building a school culture that supports teacher creativity and professional development. We anticipate that this research will assist principals, policymakers, and education practitioners in crafting more effective free-form learning strategies. Ultimately, the findings will improve the quality of learning and raise teachers' awareness of their transformative role (Abuhassna et al., 2020).

Much research has addressed educational leadership and the implementation of new policies (Day et al., 2016; Troung et al., 2017; Pont, 2020; Tirri et al., 2021), but few have specifically examined how principal leadership directly influences teacher awareness within the context of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn). Previous studies tended to focus on the impact of leadership on teacher performance, motivation, or overall job satisfaction. However, few studies have specifically examined "Merdeka Belajar". This gap remains relevant, given that a profound understanding of the "Merdeka Belajar" philosophy is essential for consistent and meaningful implementation.

This study offers innovation by specifically focusing on "teacher awareness" as an external aspect of principal leadership in the context of Merdeka Belajar (Andriyanto et al., 2023). This unique approach differentiates it from previous research that focused more on outcomes or technology implementation. We will discuss not only the leadership methods used but also how they influence teachers' cognitive understanding, affective acceptance, and behavioral commitment to the principles of Merdeka Belajar (Ikram et al., 2021; Wijaya et al., 2022). This method will use a multidimensional framework to analyze how leadership style, the school environment, and teacher responses interact with each other. Research on this issue is scarce in the existing literature. Therefore, this study is expected to provide new information on the transformational role played by principals in shaping teachers' professional awareness.

This study aims to comprehensively analyze the role played by principals in supporting and increasing teacher awareness regarding the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in the school environment. Specifically, this study will identify the most effective principal leadership strategies in increasing understanding, acceptance, and implementation of Merdeka Belajar.

2. METHOD

This type of research is a combination of quantitative and qualitative. This study examines the causal relationship between an open leadership style in school budget management and teacher motivation, innovation, and teaching and learning quality. This study also employs a mixed-methods approach, primarily focusing on quantitative methods, to enhance comprehension of the context. The following is a mixed-methods approach presented in Figure 1 (Kahwati & Kane, 2020).
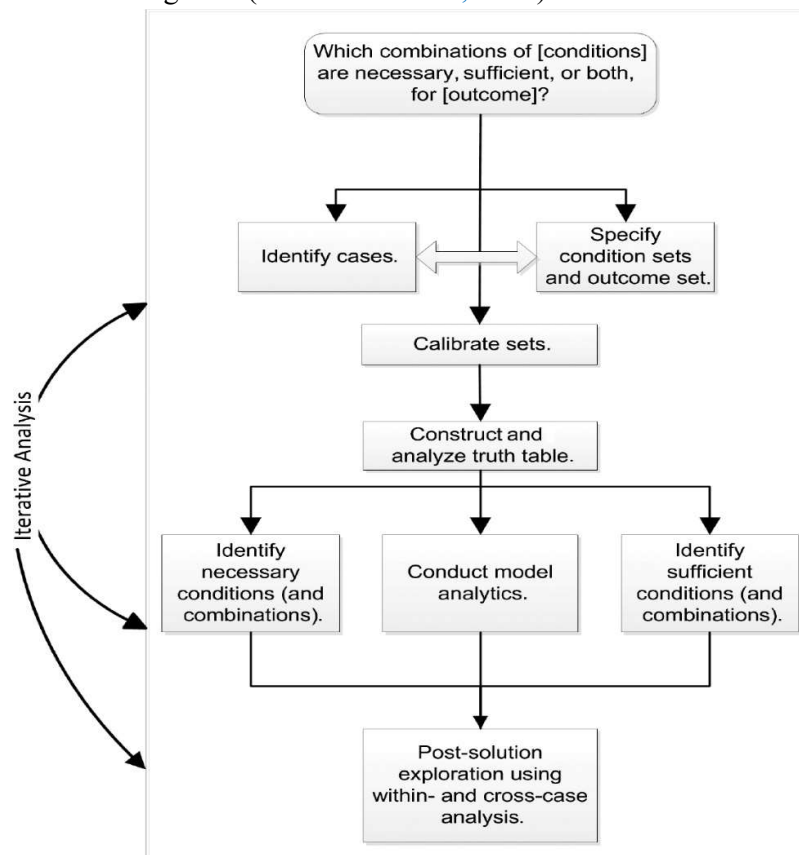

Figure 1. A Mixed-Methods Approach

Researchers used a purposive sampling method to select teachers from several junior high and high schools in the Bekasi area. Selection criteria were based on relevant experience, the level of transparency of the school budget, and the duration of the principal's leadership. Statistical calculations for representativeness were used to determine the sample size.

For qualitative data, semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals were also conducted, and a structured questionnaire (Likert Scale) was used to measure teachers' perceptions of innovation, leadership, motivation, and teaching quality. Financial reports, or secondary data, can be used as supporting data.

Classical assumption tests were used to analyze quantitative data with descriptive statistics and multiple regression, and thesis tests were used to identify patterns and themes. In the interpretation stage, both types of data were integrated to provide a better understanding.

3. **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**
The Principal's Transformational Leadership Function in Increasing Teacher Awareness

The study results indicated that principals consistently demonstrated four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and transformational leadership. Fifteen principals and 30 teachers in three pilot schools demonstrated a significant role in raising teacher awareness of the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. Teachers were motivated to follow the Merdeka Belajar vision because they demonstrated a strong commitment to it (Irawati et al., 2022; Tamami et al., 2023). By communicating the goals and benefits of Merdeka Belajar, inspirational motivation emerged. This process requires enthusiasm and ownership among teachers.

For example, one principal stated, "*I constantly try to explain why Merdeka Belajar is important, not only for students but also for our professional growth as teachers.*" The principals' encouragement of teachers to try new teaching approaches, collaborate, and identify innovative ways to solve implementation problems is evidence of intellectual stimulation. They encouraged critical discussion and introspection. Finally, individualized consideration was provided through personal support, guidance, and recognition of teachers' efforts, which helped them overcome challenges and develop their potential. The quantitative survey data showed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.01$). Teachers in the principal's transformational leadership group received a higher average score for Merdeka Belajar awareness (4.2 out of 5.0) compared to the control group (3.5 and 5.0).

These results align with several international studies that emphasize the importance of transformational leadership in education reform. For instance, a study discovered a positive correlation between transformational leadership and teacher commitment to curriculum change (Dickson et al., 2021; Alzoraiki et al., 2023). Similarly, research has emphasized how the success of student-centered education reform is aided by school leadership that supports teachers' professional autonomy (Kordaki & Balomenou, 2006; Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015). Other research has found that principals who inspire and provide intellectual stimulation successfully encourage teachers to implement pedagogical innovations (Drago-Severson, 2012; Yi & Na, 2020). By comparing these findings to a global context, we can deepen our analysis and demonstrate that, despite differences in educational systems and cultures, the principles of transformational leadership remain relevant in fostering change and enhancing teachers' professional awareness. We found that elements of transformational leadership found in international literature also work well in Indonesia to raise teachers' awareness of Freedom to Learn.

Previous studies have found that a clear vision from school leaders can increase teacher motivation, and principals encourage pedagogical experimentation (Szeto & Cheng, 2018; Zhang & Zheng, 2020). Specifically, we found that Jones (2020) argued that transformational leadership is crucial for creating a school culture that adapts to change. However, our research specifically links aspects of transformational leadership to increasing teachers' awareness of the Freedom to Learn philosophy, not just its

practical implementation. The present study complements our previous research, where previous research has tended to focus on performance or general motivation without explicitly examining intrinsic awareness. We demonstrate that principals not only teach but also build teachers' understanding and beliefs, which are the foundation of deep awareness.

This research makes a significant contribution to the development of science and technology in the field of educational leadership and pedagogy. Theoretically, this study adds the element of "increased teacher awareness" as a specific indicator of success in the context of curriculum reform, enriching the transformational leadership model. It provides a deeper understanding of how leadership can influence teachers' affective and cognitive aspects, not just their behavior. These facts have significant consequences for programs designed to improve principal leadership. To ensure better implementation of "Merdeka Belajar", leadership training should focus more on developing transformational skills, including the ability to inspire others, provide intellectual stimulation, and demonstrate personal consideration. The development of a broader evaluation framework to measure teacher awareness is also a contribution of science and technology. This framework can be applied to other educational reforms. Furthermore, this study suggests the development of a digital platform for implementing transformational leadership for "Merdeka Belajar". This initiative will accelerate the dissemination of knowledge and innovation.

The Effect of Principal Capacity Development and Professional Support on Teacher Awareness

The research findings show that principals' professional support and opportunities to develop their skills significantly increased teachers' awareness of the implementation of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning). Based on classroom observations and document analysis, principals proactively identified the need for teacher training related to Merdeka Belajar (Mudrikah et al., 2022; Sabatini et al., 2022). They then provided various types of support. Regular workshops on the use of formative assessment, student-centered learning design, and the use of technology in learning were part of this support (Minsih et al., 2023). Furthermore, principals provided support for individual training and mentoring programs. These programs enabled experienced teachers to offer guidance to their colleagues experiencing difficulties (Tingle et al., 2019; Hariri et al., 2020).

Additionally, data showed that teacher participation in professional development activities increased. 85 percent of teachers participated in at least two workshops each semester. Case studies of teachers indicated that this support enhanced their understanding of the Merdeka Belajar philosophy and gave them the confidence to implement it. As an illustration, one educator said, "*The support from the principal and the coaching sessions really opened my eyes to how Merdeka Belajar can be implemented in my classroom*." Analysis of teacher reflections indicated that they better understood their role as facilitators rather than simply transmitters of material. With a significant effect size (d=0.85), teacher awareness scores, measured after participating

in the professional support program, significantly increased (4.0 out of 5.0) compared to pre-program scores (3.2 out of 5.0).

These results are consistent with international literature emphasizing that ongoing professional development is crucial for the success of curriculum reform. For example, research conducted by Fullan (2001); Nores and Fernandez (2018) demonstrated that relevant capacity building and systemic support are crucial for implementing educational innovations. In research conducted by Day et al. (2007); Gutierez and Kim (2017), researchers found that professional development programs emphasizing reflective practice and collaboration can increase teacher productivity. Comparisons with practices in developed countries indicate that the way principals in Indonesia provide professional support and capacity development aligns with global best practices. However, our research specifically highlights how this support directly influences teachers' awareness of the Merdeka Belajar philosophy. More general professional development studies often overlook this aspect. This implies that the principal's support and the amount, relevance, and level of training are vital to teachers' awareness.

This study aligns with research showing that teachers' self-confidence increases when they have access to relevant training (Ashcraft, 2017; Malandrakis, 2018) and research emphasizing the role of mentoring in driving practice change (Le Roux & Nagel, 2018). Specifically, our results support the assertion that impact is greater when professional development is integrated into the school context and supported by effective leadership (Haataja et al., 2019; Yurtseven Avci et al., 2020). However, our research demonstrates that professional support and capacity building improve skills and performance and fundamentally shift teachers' awareness of their position and responsibilities within a free-flowing learning environment. Our work complements the existing literature by providing empirical evidence of how teacher capacity building, facilitated by the principal, can directly enhance deep philosophical understanding.

The results of this study significantly contribute to the advancement of science and technology in the field of educational management and teacher professional development (Hemmi et al., 2021; Minsih et al., 2023). This study theoretically deepens our understanding of how capacity development influences teachers' cognitive and affective changes. This article is particularly relevant for the transition to new paradigms such as Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) (Kilic, 2010; Hazril et al., 2022). It demonstrates that awareness is the result of supported learning experiences, not just knowledge. These findings have significant practical implications for the creation of teacher professional development programs. The principal's active role as a facilitator and support provider, not just as an administrator, should guide the design of these programs. Furthermore, science and technology can benefit from the development of customizable digital platforms for teacher professional development. These platforms can tailor materials and support to each teacher's needs and level of awareness. Furthermore, this study suggests the development of technology-based diagnostic tools to more effectively identify disparities in teacher awareness. This will enable principals to provide more targeted interventions and, overall, improve the success of independent learning practices (Brennan & Hugo, 2016; Molnár & Csapó, 2019).

In the long term, the ultimate goal of this research area is to create flexible and innovative educational environments where every principal has the capacity to be a transformational leader. It is hoped that increased teacher awareness and effective leadership will foster a culture of continuous learning where teachers proactively seek new ways to teach.

4.   CONCLUSION

This study found that principal leadership, particularly through the application of a transformational approach and the provision of professional support and capacity building, significantly increased teacher awareness of the implementation of "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn). The results indicate that principals who act as role models, inspire, stimulate intellectually, and provide individualized attention effectively increase teachers' understanding and commitment to the "Merdeka Belajar" philosophy. Similarly, relevant workshops, mentoring, and training facilitated by principals have proven effective in raising teacher awareness and shifting their role from information transmitters to learning facilitators. Two main mechanisms facilitated by principal leadership achieve this increase in teacher awareness. First, transformational leadership builds an environment conducive to innovation and mindset change. Principals create a clear vision, encourage teachers to experiment, and provide personal support, giving teachers a sense of security to try new approaches and reflect on their practice. Second, targeted professional support and capacity building equip teachers with the practical knowledge and skills necessary to implement Merdeka Belajar. Through workshops and individual coaching, teachers not only understand "what" Merdeka Belajar is but also develop a more profound understanding of what "Merdeka Belajar" is.

While this research provides valuable insights, there are several limitations that could impact future research. To track the long-term impact of increased teacher awareness on student learning outcomes, longitudinal studies could be conducted to expand this research. Furthermore, further research could investigate how principal leadership and teacher awareness are moderated by external factors, such as government policies or community support. To understand differences in implementation and impact, comparative studies should be conducted across regions or school types (e.g., elementary versus secondary schools, or urban versus rural schools). Finally, further research could potentially develop and test principal leadership intervention models that utilize technology to increase teacher awareness more effectively and at scale.

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