

The Principal's Strategy for Implementing Merdeka Curriculum at SD Negeri 3 Margo Bhakti

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the principal's strategies in planning, implementing, and evaluating Merdeka Curriculum and its contribution to improving the quality of education at SD Negeri 3 Margo Bhakti, Mesuji District, Ogan Komering Ilir Regency. As the first School leader (Sekolah Penggerak) in the area, SDN 3 Margo Bhakti has emerged as a pioneer and reference point in educational transformation, with the highest number of students among nearby elementary schools. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed to explore the leadership strategies adopted by the school principal in navigating the challenges and opportunities of Merdeka Curriculum implementation. The findings show that the principal's strategy is organized into three main steps: planning, which uses SWOT analysis and matches the school's goals; implementation, which focuses on teamwork among teachers, technology use, community participation, and clear budget management; and evaluation, which happens regularly through supervision and analysis of academic data. Merdeka Curriculum has greatly improved the quality of education at the school, making learning more flexible, enjoyable, and meaningful, while also promoting character development through the Pancasila Student Profile. Additionally, teachers receive ongoing training, mentoring, support from Merdeka Mengajar platform, and varied teaching methods. With strong leadership and steady execution, SDN 3 Margo Bhakti has successfully built an innovative, inclusive, and forward-looking learning environment.

Keywords: Education Quality, Merdeka Curriculum, Principal's Strategy

A. Introduction

Education is a long-term investment that determines the future of a nation. Without a strong education system, a nation will struggle to develop and compete on the global stage (Alam, 2022). Education is one of the main pillars of national development, serving to produce a high-quality and highly competitive next generation (Kumar et al., 2021). In Indonesia, the quality of education remains an issue that requires serious attention from various parties, including the government, the community, and educators. Various policies and programs have been launched to improve the quality of education, one of which is Merdeka Curriculum, which aims to create a more

innovative and relevant learning environment to meet the needs of the times (Rohmah et al., 2023). In implementing Merdeka Curriculum, the principal plays a crucial role in driving a student-centered learning process and providing freedom for educators and staff (Husnul Haq & Wakidi, 2024; Wulandari et al., 2024). An effective principal is able to create a conducive learning environment, encourage innovation in teaching methods, and ensure that all school resources are optimally utilized to improve the quality of education.

As a central figure in an educational institution, the principal plays a strategic role in directing school operations, formulating internal policies, empowering educators, and fostering a conducive learning environment (Abbaspour et al., 2024; Lijun & Te, 2024). Furthermore, the principal also plays a role in fostering enthusiasm and participation among students, parents, and the entire school community. Effective leadership includes the ability to manage human resources, inspire and motivate teachers and students, and foster a positive and comfortable learning culture (Culduz, 2023). A good principal must also be able to adapt to change and implement new educational policies effectively and efficiently (Darmansah, 2023; Jhonshon et al., 2024). The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in schools also requires strong support from the principal, teachers, and school staff (Agustin et al., 2023). Merdeka Curriculum is designed to provide space for creativity and innovation in learning, while accommodating individual differences according to student abilities. Therefore, a deep understanding and skills in implementing this curriculum are crucial for principals, teachers, and educational staff. Challenges in implementing this curriculum include integrating technology into learning, developing relevant and engaging learning materials for students, and comprehensively evaluating student learning processes and outcomes (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Nur 'Azah et al., 2024).

SDN 3 Margo Bhakti is one example of a school demonstrating initial success in implementing Merdeka Curriculum. As the first school leader in Mesuji District, Ogan Komering Ilir (OKI) Regency, SDN 3 Margo Bhakti is not only a pioneer but also a reference for other schools in implementing educational transformation. This success is inseparable from the strategies implemented by the principal, including change management, teacher empowerment, and creating a collaborative and innovative learning climate. Furthermore, SDN 3 Margo Bhakti also has the largest student population compared to other elementary schools in the surrounding area. This fact demonstrates the high level of community trust in the quality of education provided at this school. With such a large student population, effective management strategies are required to ensure the smooth implementation of Merdeka Curriculum without sacrificing learning quality. The school's success in managing these dynamics is a crucial point worthy of further study.

This study aims to analyze the principal's strategy for implementing Merdeka Curriculum at Margo Bhakti 3 Public Elementary School, Mesuji District, Ogan Komering Ilir Regency. By understanding the factors influencing the principal's

strategy for implementing Merdeka Curriculum, it is hoped that this will provide constructive recommendations for stakeholders, principals, and educators in their efforts to improve the quality of education in the region. This study will also examine the extent to which the principal's strategy for implementing Merdeka Curriculum can be adapted and implemented effectively in the school environment, using various steps according to the characteristics of students in Mesuji District, Ogan Komering Ilir Regency. Overall, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of the principal's strategy for implementing Merdeka Curriculum at Margo Bhakti 3 Public Elementary School in Mesuji District, Ogan Komering Ilir Regency. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to serve as a valuable reference for other schools wishing to implement Merdeka Curriculum and for the government in formulating more effective and efficient education policies. This research is also expected to contribute to the development of educational leadership theory by implementing the curriculum in the context of schools in Indonesia.

B. Methods

This study used a descriptive qualitative method. Qualitative research adheres to a naturalistic or phenomenological paradigm, which examines the understanding of research subjects in a natural context and employs scientific methods (Moleong, 2016). In this study, the researcher will describe the principal's strategy in implementing Merdeka Curriculum at SD Negeri 3 Margo Bhakti, Mesuji District, Ogan Komering Ilir Regency. We conducted this research at SD Negeri 3 Margo Bhakti, which has implemented Merdeka Curriculum in Mesuji District, Ogan Komering Ilir Regency. The study period was from January 2025 to March 2025. In this study, the researcher identified informants deemed capable of providing relevant and in-depth information related to the topic under study, commonly known as key informants. The key informants selected were one principal, 13 educators, and 13 education personnel. The data collection techniques in this study used observation, interview, and documentation study techniques. The success of a naturalistic study is highly dependent on the accuracy and completeness of the notes compiled through observation, interviews, documentation, and literature studies. Data validity tests used credibility tests and dependability tests. In this study, the data analysis techniques applied include data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

C. Results and Discussion

The Principal's Strategy Includes Planning

In developing strategic planning, the principal carries out various stages, including formulating the vision and mission. Interviews with teachers at Margo Bhakti 3 Elementary School also confirmed that the principal conducted an analysis by discussing the school's vision and mission with teachers and the school committee

before formulating the school's vision and mission. To further clarify whether the committee was involved in developing the school's vision and mission, I also interviewed the school committee, including a representative from the committee chair.



Figure 1. Committee and Parent Meeting

From the documentation of the School Activity Plan and Budget (RKAS), there is a budget that involves parents or committees in preparing the vision and mission or school budget planning. The initial planning strategy carried out by the principal in implementing Merdeka curriculum is to conduct socialization within the school and prepare school readiness in implementing the curriculum. It can be concluded from the results of interviews and documentation about teacher, committee, and parent meetings that in this case the principal, in carrying out planning to develop the implementation of the SD Negeri 3 Margo Bhakti curriculum, has been directed by involving all elements of the school, both internally and externally. The principal's initial strategy is how to implement Merdeka curriculum by collaborating and working together with teachers in implementing Merdeka curriculum. SDN 3 Margo Bhakti School has 3 funding sources: the first is from the Regular BOS Fund, BOS Performance, and donations from PT Sampoerna Agro. The principal of SDN 3 Margo Bhakti has good cooperation with PT Sampoerna Agro in this case to improve the quality of education at the school. Every year funds sourced from PT Sampoerna Agro are used for activities to improve the quality of education by improving project-based learning, or P5.



Figure 2. Implementation of P5 with PT. Sampoerna Agro

In school budget planning, the principal has a clear objective: improving the quality of education through Merdeka Curriculum at SD Negeri 3 Margo Bhakti. This planning prioritizes learning quality by organizing activities to improve teacher competency and facilitate student activities. Several explanations from the principal, treasurer, committee, and RKAS documentation indicate that the school has implemented effective planning, particularly in budget planning. The school understands the primary needs and objectives for achieving the school's vision and mission by increasing activities to improve teacher competency and facilitate student activities. It can be concluded that the principal has a sound planning strategy for formulating a sound vision and mission, taking into account strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities. According to Sujoko (2017) and Fahim et al. (2021), developing a strategic plan to improve school quality requires the use of analytical tools. One frequently used tool is the SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. In planning, the principal refers to the school's strengths or positive aspects. He considers aspects that are not yet conducive to achieving educational goals. He seeks out various opportunities that can be achieved if the school's potential is maximized. He also addresses various possibilities that could hinder or impact the continuity and sustainability of school activities.

From a budgeting perspective, he refers to the goals of the school's vision and mission. In accordance with several theories, the principal must formulate a clear and effective vision and mission to improve the quality of education at the school. By being able to formulate the vision and communicate it to the entire school community, including the committee, the principal must be able to effectively implement the school's vision and goals. These findings align with Mukti's (2018) statement regarding a leader's ability to create, formulate, communicate, socialize, transform, and implement ideal ideas that originate within the organization or result from social interactions with

organizational members and stakeholders. These ideas become the organization's future goals, which must be achieved through the shared commitment of all personnel. From several planning aspects, the principal carries out intensive management and coaching in developing teacher professionalism in carrying out their duties (Karacabey, 2021; Tanjung, 2020).

The Principal's Strategy Includes Implementation

The principal of SD Negeri 3 Margo Bhakti's strategy in implementing leadership is always arriving early to ensure that all teachers and students are ready to learn. From the results of interviews with the principal, school guards, and parents, the principal is a figure worthy of emulation. In accordance with the statements of several experts on leadership, namely how a leader is able to influence subordinates and become an example for subordinates to achieve organizational goals. In this case, in line with the statement of Salas-Vallina et al. (2020), the leader encourages and motivates his followers to achieve extraordinary achievements, inspiring them to give more effort than expected. This type of transformational leadership involves leaders who are able to influence strongly, inspire their followers, and invite them to prioritize collective interests over their personal interests. It is also strengthened by Terry's theory in Soeari et al. (2022), which means that leadership is an activity to influence people so that they are easily directed to achieve organizational goals. Leadership encompasses the process of influencing the organization's goals, motivating followers' behavior to achieve those goals, and influencing the group and its resources to improve their performance.

The principal not only demonstrates behavior but also ensures that the curriculum is optimally implemented in accordance with the school's goals. To improve teacher performance, the principal must be able to encourage teachers to improve their own competencies, provide full support, and utilize the school's capabilities by utilizing existing facilities and infrastructure. This is in line with the results of interviews with teachers. Interviews with principals, teachers, and the RKAS documentation indicate that the principal's implementation not only emphasizes teacher performance but also provides facilities and infrastructure to improve teacher quality.

In this case, the principal has an instructional leadership style. According to (Bellibaş et al., 2021), an instructional leadership style encourages the implementation of various activities and provides appropriate support to improve the quality of teacher performance and the success of classroom learning. In this role, the principal prioritizes teacher development as a key component while also providing appropriate support to improve the quality of teaching and learning outcomes in the classroom. Thus, the principal's instructional leadership not only initiates but also strengthens the implementation of various activities that support effective learning (Liljenberg, 2021). School development will certainly improve with community support.

To improve the quality of education at school, the involvement of the community is crucial. The principal's strategy, in its implementation, has been to establish a positive school ecosystem where education takes place not only at school but also within the community. The school receives support from the village government and the school committee, including the construction of a permanent school fence and canteen. Furthermore, the collaboration with the Cooperatives and Village Funds (KUD) and PT Sampoerna has also had a positive impact on the school, particularly in terms of activities. The KUD provides assistance to high-achieving students at the end of each semester, and PT Sampoerna offers assistance to support the Pancasila Student Profile Project (P5) Strengthening Program. These findings are certainly supported by Muspawi's statement (2020) regarding the principal's duties, namely building collaboration between students, the community, and the school committee to meet the needs of all relevant parties. As stated by Sayekti et al. (2023), leadership can be articulated into traits, behavior, influence on others, patterns, interactions, cooperative relationships between roles, administrative positions, and other people's perceptions of the legitimacy of influence.

The Principal's Strategy Includes Evaluation

In strategic management, evaluation serves to assess whether the implemented strategy is in line with the established plan. This process requires continuous monitoring, implementation assessment, and input in the form of suggestions, criticisms, and opinions from various parties involved. The principal's strategy for classroom supervision emphasizes the individual's ability to reflect on their own abilities, find solutions, and demonstrate commitment. To evaluate student learning outcomes, the school holds regular meetings at the end of each semester to ensure curriculum completion. In line with Fathoni's (2024) statement, the principal's duties and functions include designing the school's direction as an educational institution by developing a vision, mission, and objectives. Managing the school by establishing an organizational structure, appointing staff, and assigning clear duties and functions to each staff member. Encouraging staff enthusiasm through internal and external marketing approaches. Supervising by directing, guiding, and supervising all staff and school residents.

Evaluating educational processes and outcomes as a basis for improving educational quality and solving problems creatively. Not only limited to evaluation, the principal also designs the evaluation results as a follow-up to improve the quality of curriculum implementation. The implementation of Merdeka curriculum at Margo Bhakti 3 Elementary School begins with a thorough understanding of the curriculum through training sessions held by the Teacher Leader Center, the Education Office, and the school's community. Research shows that the training aimed to deepen students' knowledge of Merdeka curriculum.

To better understand Merdeka curriculum, the teachers' council also utilized Merdeka Teaching Platform to facilitate teachers continued learning. Merdeka curriculum emphasizes individual characteristics, experiences, backgrounds, perspectives, talents, interests, capacities, and needs of students. Educational report documentation demonstrates that the implementation of Merdeka curriculum at SD Negeri 3 Margo Bhakti has had a positive impact, with students' literacy and numeracy skills improving. This is also inseparable from the performance of the principal and teachers in implementing Merdeka curriculum effectively. Merdeka curriculum is inseparable from character education through the Pancasila Student Profile, which is carried out at school. This aligns with Maulida's statement that the 2022 Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes character development through learning materials integrated with the Pancasila Student Profile. The character development encompasses the core values of Pancasila, such as noble character, piety, independence, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. Interviews with teachers and educational report cards demonstrate that student character development has been enhanced by the habit-building programs implemented at Margo Bhakti 3 Elementary School. This aligns with the objectives of Merdeka curriculum, which emphasizes Pancasila values, including noble character, mutual cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and global diversity in everyday life.

The leadership strategy implemented by the principal of Margo Bhakti 3 Elementary School in implementing Merdeka Curriculum is a highly appropriate and visionary step in efforts to improve educational quality at the school. One strategy implemented is a SWOT analysis, which serves as a strong foundation for designing school development policies and programs. The results of this analysis are used as the basis for formulating strategic steps oriented towards improving the quality of learning. Margo Bhakti 3 Public Elementary School has demonstrated a strong commitment to implementing Merdeka Curriculum. Implementation of this curriculum is not solely the responsibility of the principal but also involves all school components, especially teachers, committee members, and the surrounding community. Nearly all teachers at this school understand the basic concepts and principles of Merdeka Curriculum. This is reflected in their learning practices, where teachers are able to design and implement learning processes that are relevant, contextual, and aligned with students' characteristics, interests, and talents. Furthermore, teachers at Margo Bhakti 3 Public Elementary School also demonstrate good skills in utilizing available facilities and infrastructure to support the learning process. They actively use various media and technology to create a fun and meaningful learning environment for students. This success is certainly inseparable from the active role of the principal as a learning leader who is able to provide direction and motivation and create a collaborative and innovative school culture. With the synergy between strong leadership and the support of all school elements, Margo Bhakti 3 Public Elementary School continues to strive to become an excellent educational institution in implementing Merdeka Curriculum to continuously improve the quality of education.

D. Conclusion

The principal of SDN 3 Margo Bhakti's clear and focused strategy emphasizes the importance of a structured process for improving educational quality, encompassing three main stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. During the planning stage, the school develops a vision and mission relevant to student needs and national policies and uses a SWOT analysis to design short- and long-term plans. During the implementation stage, the principal encourages collaboration through teacher training, technology utilization, facility optimization, community involvement, and transparent budget management. Meanwhile, the evaluation stage is conducted through supervision, analysis of academic and attendance data, and regular meetings to refine strategies and develop follow-up programs. With a comprehensive strategy involving various parties, SDN 3 Margo Bhakti is committed to creating a conducive, high-quality, and sustainable learning environment.

The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum at SDN 3 Margo Bhakti has had a significant positive impact on improving educational quality. The school not only facilitates teachers through training, mentoring, and the use of the Independent Teaching Platform, but also simplifies administration and encourages a differentiated learning approach. This makes it easier for teachers to understand and implement the curriculum effectively. In terms of implementation, Merdeka Curriculum provides more flexible, enjoyable, and meaningful learning for students through a project-based approach, strengthening literacy and numeracy, and assessments that emphasize holistic student development. Furthermore, the values in the Pancasila Student Profile help shape students' character, leading them to become religious, independent, creative, and critical individuals. With a well-planned strategy and consistent implementation, SD Negeri 3 Margo Bhakti has succeeded in creating a learning environment that is innovative, inclusive, and relevant to the needs of the times and students.

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