

# Visionary Leadership in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum to Foster Student Character and Learning Autonomy in Elementary Schools

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how visionary leadership supports the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum to foster student character and learning autonomy in elementary education. The research was conducted at MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir using a qualitative case study design involving one principal and six teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, then analyzed using thematic procedures. The findings show that the principal enacted visionary leadership through clear direction, consistent communication, and instructional support that guided teachers in applying student-centered learning. Teachers implemented the curriculum through contextual and flexible activities that integrated character values and promoted independent learning. Students demonstrated increased responsibility, confidence, and active participation, along with improved ability to regulate their learning processes. The alignment between leadership vision and instructional practices created a coherent learning environment that strengthened both character formation and autonomy. The study concludes that visionary leadership is essential in sustaining curriculum reform and enhancing student development in elementary schools.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant transformation in elementary education by emphasizing student-centered learning, character development, and learning autonomy. This curriculum encourages students to become active participants in constructing knowledge through exploration, reflection, and meaningful engagement. In practice, many schools continue to experience challenges in translating these principles into effective classroom implementation. Teaching practices often remain dominated by structured routines and directive instruction, which limit opportunities for students to develop independence and responsibility. Such conditions create a gap between policy expectations and classroom realities. The success of curriculum reform depends not only on the design of the curriculum but also on how it is enacted within schools. Research indicates that student-centered approaches require supportive institutional conditions, including leadership that promotes innovation and flexibility in teaching practices (Biesta, 2015). This context leads to a critical inquiry into how visionary leadership can guide the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum to foster student character and learning autonomy in elementary schools.

Leadership plays a decisive role in shaping how curriculum change is interpreted and implemented at the school level. Visionary leadership is characterized by the ability to articulate long-term goals, inspire collective commitment, and align organizational practices with shared values. In educational settings, this form of leadership encourages teachers to move beyond routine instruction toward more adaptive and responsive teaching strategies. Principals are expected to act as instructional leaders who provide direction, facilitate

professional learning, and create a supportive climate for pedagogical innovation. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to design flexible learning experiences that accommodate student diversity and promote active participation. This shift in practice demands leadership that not only communicates expectations but also supports teachers through guidance and professional collaboration. Studies have shown that leadership with a clear vision and strong instructional focus contributes to improved teaching quality and school effectiveness (Bush, 2020; Day & Sammons, 2016). These considerations raise an important question regarding how visionary leadership is enacted in guiding teachers to implement the Merdeka Curriculum in ways that strengthen both character development and independent learning.

The interaction between leadership and curriculum implementation becomes increasingly relevant when examined through its impact on student outcomes. Character development involves the cultivation of values such as responsibility, discipline, and cooperation, which require consistent reinforcement through daily learning activities. Learning autonomy refers to students' ability to regulate their own learning processes, including setting goals, monitoring progress, and reflecting on outcomes. These competencies cannot be developed through passive learning environments. They require instructional approaches that provide opportunities for decision-making, inquiry, and self-expression. The Merdeka Curriculum offers a framework that supports these processes by encouraging flexible learning pathways and contextualized experiences. Research highlights that autonomy-supportive learning environments contribute to higher student motivation and deeper engagement in learning tasks (Reeve, 2012). Leadership plays a central role in ensuring that such environments are created and sustained within schools.

The alignment between leadership vision and instructional practice determines the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. When school leaders actively engage in guiding teaching practices, they create coherence between policy, pedagogy, and assessment. This coherence enables teachers to implement curriculum innovations with greater confidence and consistency. Visionary leadership also fosters a culture of collaboration, where teachers share experiences, reflect on practices, and develop strategies to improve student learning. Such professional environments support continuous improvement and innovation. Evidence suggests that schools with strong leadership and collaborative cultures are more successful in implementing educational reforms and improving student outcomes (Harris & Jones, 2019). This perspective emphasizes that leadership is not limited to administrative functions but extends to shaping the core processes of teaching and learning.

The Merdeka Curriculum places students at the center of the learning process, which requires a shift in both mindset and practice among educators. Teachers are expected to facilitate learning experiences that allow students to explore ideas, express opinions, and take responsibility for their learning. This approach aligns with constructivist principles, where knowledge is developed through active engagement and social interaction. Leadership becomes essential in supporting this transformation by providing direction, resources, and continuous encouragement. The success of such initiatives depends on the ability of school leaders to bridge the gap between curriculum policy and classroom implementation. Visionary leadership offers a framework for achieving this alignment by focusing on long-term educational goals and fostering a shared commitment among teachers.

This study aims to explore how leadership-driven curriculum implementation influences student character and learning autonomy in an elementary school context. The research focuses on MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir as a case that reflects the interaction between leadership practices and instructional innovation. The study addresses three key questions related to leadership enactment, curriculum implementation, and student outcomes. These questions guide the analysis of how visionary leadership supports the realization of the Merdeka Curriculum and its impact on students' development. The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of leadership in sustaining educational reform and improving the quality of learning in elementary schools.

## 2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how visionary leadership shapes the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum within a natural school setting. A qualitative approach was selected to capture detailed perspectives of participants and to understand the interaction between leadership practices and classroom processes. The case study design enabled an in-depth exploration of a bounded system, focusing on one institution as a representative context of curriculum reform at the elementary level. The research was conducted at MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir, an elementary school that has actively implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. This setting provided a relevant context for examining how leadership practices influence teaching strategies and student learning experiences in everyday situations. Case study research is considered appropriate for investigating complex educational phenomena within real-life contexts, where multiple sources of evidence are required to understand the dynamics involved (Stake, 1995; Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Participants in this study consisted of one school principal and six classroom teachers who were directly involved in curriculum implementation. A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure that participants

possessed relevant experience and understanding of the research focus. The principal was selected due to their central role in policy direction and instructional leadership, while teachers were chosen based on their active engagement in designing and implementing learning activities aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. This selection allowed for the collection of rich and diverse data related to leadership practices and instructional adaptation. Qualitative sampling strategies emphasize depth of information rather than generalization, making them suitable for studies that seek to explore meaning and experience (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

Data collection involved multiple techniques to ensure comprehensive and credible findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of leadership practices, curriculum implementation, and student learning processes. Classroom observations were carried out to document teaching strategies, student engagement, and the integration of character and autonomy within learning activities. Documentation analysis included lesson plans, student assignments, and assessment records, which provided additional insights into instructional practices and outcomes. The use of multiple data sources strengthened the depth of analysis and enabled cross-verification of findings. Triangulation is widely recognized as an essential strategy for enhancing validity in qualitative research (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involved systematic procedures of coding, categorization, and interpretation. Data from interviews, observations, and documents were transcribed and reviewed repeatedly to identify patterns and recurring themes. Codes were organized into broader categories that reflected key aspects of leadership practices and curriculum implementation. The interpretation process focused on linking empirical findings with conceptual understanding of visionary leadership and student-centered learning. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied member checking by sharing findings with participants for confirmation, along with data triangulation across different sources. These procedures enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research results.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### **Visionary Leadership Practices in Supporting the Merdeka Curriculum**

The findings show that the principal at MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir enacted visionary leadership through the articulation of a clear educational direction centered on student learning, character formation, and autonomy. This vision was expressed in strategic planning documents and reinforced in routine meetings, informal conversations, and daily instructional supervision. Teachers described the vision as concrete and actionable, guiding lesson design and classroom interaction. The principal emphasized alignment between curriculum intentions and classroom practice, encouraging teachers to translate policy language into meaningful learning experiences. Vision communication functioned as a unifying mechanism that shaped shared understanding and collective commitment. Evidence from educational leadership research indicates that leaders who consistently communicate a clear vision are able to influence instructional coherence and teacher engagement in reform initiatives (Leithwood, 2012; Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021).

Leadership practices extended to mentoring and continuous feedback aimed at strengthening teachers' capacity to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. The principal conducted classroom walkthroughs followed by reflective discussions that focused on lesson objectives, student engagement, and assessment strategies. Teachers reported that feedback was specific and oriented toward improvement rather than evaluation. This practice supported professional learning by linking theory with classroom realities. Mentoring sessions addressed the design of flexible learning activities, integration of character values, and strategies for promoting student autonomy. The presence of sustained guidance reduced uncertainty associated with curriculum change and encouraged teachers to refine their instructional approaches. Research has shown that leadership practices that prioritize instructional support contribute to teacher development and improved classroom practices (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018).

Collaboration among teachers emerged as a central feature of the school's professional culture. The principal facilitated structured forums for lesson study, peer observation, and joint planning of learning modules. Teachers used these spaces to exchange ideas, review student work, and reflect on instructional challenges. Collaborative practices enabled teachers to co-construct knowledge about effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Shared planning contributed to the development of coherent learning experiences across classrooms, which supported consistency in promoting character and autonomy. Teachers noted that collaboration reduced isolation and increased confidence in experimenting with new strategies. Studies on professional collaboration indicate that collective teacher efficacy is strengthened when schools create conditions for ongoing dialogue and shared problem-solving (Goddard, Goddard, Sook Kim, & Miller, 2015).

The principal also promoted innovation while maintaining alignment with institutional values and community expectations. Teachers were encouraged to design contextual learning activities that reflect students' experiences and local culture. At the same time, the principal ensured that innovations remained consistent with curricular standards and school goals. This balance between flexibility and coherence allowed

teachers to adapt instruction without losing focus on essential competencies. The leadership approach emphasized trust, granting teachers autonomy in decision-making while providing clear boundaries related to curriculum expectations. Such a balance is associated with adaptive leadership practices that enable schools to respond to change while sustaining organizational stability (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

Teachers expressed increased clarity in understanding curriculum expectations and greater confidence in applying flexible learning approaches. Interviews indicated that teachers moved from initial uncertainty to active engagement in designing student-centered lessons. They reported a stronger sense of ownership over instructional decisions and a willingness to adjust practices based on student needs. This shift in professional mindset reflects the influence of leadership on teacher beliefs and motivation. Leadership that combines vision, support, and trust can transform teachers' perceptions of change from external demand into internal commitment. Empirical evidence suggests that teacher motivation is closely linked to leadership behaviors that recognize professional autonomy and provide meaningful support (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012).

The professional culture shaped by visionary leadership contributed to continuous improvement in instructional practices. Teachers engaged in cycles of planning, implementation, reflection, and revision, which enhanced the quality of learning experiences. Classroom observations indicated that lessons became more interactive, with increased opportunities for student participation and inquiry. Teachers integrated character values into daily activities, creating connections between academic content and personal development. The emphasis on reflection encouraged teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies and make adjustments accordingly. Continuous improvement processes are essential for sustaining curriculum reform, as they enable schools to adapt practices based on evidence and experience (Timperley, 2011).

The discussion highlights that visionary leadership functions as a driving force in aligning curriculum policy with classroom practice. The principal's role extended beyond administrative coordination to active engagement in instructional processes. Leadership practices that combined vision articulation, mentoring, collaboration, and support for innovation created conditions for effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These conditions enabled teachers to develop flexible and responsive teaching strategies that promote character and autonomy. The case of MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir illustrates how leadership can shape a professional culture that supports both teacher development and student learning.

The findings suggest that successful curriculum implementation requires coherence between leadership intentions and teacher practices. Visionary leadership provided direction and motivation, while collaborative structures ensured that ideas were translated into practice. The interaction between leadership and professional culture strengthened the school's capacity to sustain change. This perspective aligns with research indicating that leadership influences student outcomes through its impact on teaching quality and school climate (Grissom et al., 2021). The results underscore the importance of leadership that is deeply connected to teaching and learning processes in achieving meaningful educational transformation.

### **Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum to Foster Character and Autonomy**

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir was reflected in learning designs that emphasized contextual, flexible, and student-centered activities. Teachers structured lessons around themes connected to students' daily lives, allowing them to explore ideas through inquiry and interaction. Learning tasks were organized to integrate academic content with character values such as responsibility, cooperation, and discipline. Students participated in activities that required them to observe, discuss, and solve problems collaboratively. These experiences positioned students as active participants in the learning process, where knowledge was constructed through engagement with real situations. Contextual learning has been associated with increased relevance and deeper understanding, as students are able to connect abstract concepts with practical experiences (Johnson, 2002; Ningsih, 2020).

Character development was embedded within classroom activities rather than treated as a separate component of instruction. Teachers designed tasks that required students to take responsibility for completing assignments, respect group roles, and demonstrate discipline in managing time. Group work encouraged cooperation and mutual support among students, while reflective activities enabled them to evaluate their behavior and learning processes. Students learned to negotiate ideas, listen to peers, and make decisions collectively. These practices contributed to the formation of social and personal values that are essential in elementary education. Research indicates that character education is most effective when integrated into daily learning activities and supported by consistent teacher guidance (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

The role of teachers shifted from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of learning. Teachers guided students in formulating questions, organizing tasks, and reflecting on their progress. Classroom observations showed that teachers provided scaffolding when needed while allowing students to explore ideas independently. This approach created opportunities for students to develop autonomy in learning. Students were encouraged to ask questions, express opinions, and take initiative in completing tasks. The learning process became more interactive, with dialogue between teachers and students replacing one-directional

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instruction. Facilitative teaching practices are known to support the development of self-regulated learning, where students take control of their cognitive and behavioral processes (Zimmerman, 2002).

Learning materials were adapted to reflect students' experiences and local contexts, which enhanced engagement and comprehension. Teachers used familiar examples, local stories, and real-life situations to introduce concepts. This adaptation made learning more meaningful and accessible, as students could relate new information to their existing knowledge. Activities such as observing the environment, conducting simple investigations, and presenting findings allowed students to apply what they learned in authentic contexts. Contextualization of learning materials has been shown to improve students' ability to transfer knowledge and skills across different situations (Suryani & Hendryadi, 2015).

The development of learning autonomy was evident in students' ability to manage their own learning tasks. Students demonstrated initiative in planning activities, completing assignments, and evaluating their work. They showed increased confidence in expressing ideas and making decisions during group discussions. Teachers provided opportunities for students to set goals and reflect on their progress, which supported the development of self-regulation skills. Autonomy in learning is closely linked to students' motivation and engagement, as it allows them to experience a sense of ownership over their learning process. Studies have shown that autonomy-supportive environments enhance intrinsic motivation and improve learning outcomes (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Assessment practices were aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum by focusing on process as well as outcomes. Teachers evaluated students based on participation, collaboration, and the ability to apply knowledge in meaningful contexts. Performance-based assessment methods were used to capture students' development in both character and academic competencies. Feedback was provided continuously to support improvement and reflection. This approach allowed teachers to monitor students' progress in a comprehensive manner, beyond traditional measures of achievement. Authentic assessment is recognized as an effective strategy for evaluating complex learning outcomes, particularly in student-centered learning environments (Mueller, 2005).

The implementation process also revealed the importance of consistency in instructional practices. Teachers who consistently applied student-centered approaches created classroom environments that supported active participation and independent learning. Students became accustomed to engaging in discussions, working collaboratively, and taking responsibility for their learning. This consistency reinforced the development of character values and autonomy over time. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum depends on sustained implementation and alignment between instructional strategies and learning objectives.

The discussion highlights that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires a shift in both teaching practices and learning culture. Teachers at MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir demonstrated the ability to design learning experiences that integrate character education and autonomy within academic instruction. Their role as facilitators enabled students to engage actively and develop independent learning habits. The integration of contextual learning, collaborative activities, and reflective practices created a comprehensive framework for fostering student character and autonomy. These findings support the view that curriculum innovation can lead to meaningful educational outcomes when supported by appropriate pedagogical approaches and consistent implementation.

### **Impact on Student Character and Learning Autonomy**

The findings indicate that students at MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir experienced clear improvement in character development as a result of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation supported by visionary leadership. Students demonstrated responsible behavior through consistent task completion, adherence to classroom agreements, and active involvement in group activities. Respect toward peers became visible in classroom interactions, where students listened to others' opinions and responded constructively during discussions. These behaviors were not incidental but developed through repeated engagement in learning activities that required cooperation, accountability, and reflection. Character formation in this context emerged as a product of structured experiences embedded in daily instruction. Educational research suggests that character development is strengthened when values are practiced in authentic settings rather than taught as abstract concepts (Lickona, 1996; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008).

Students also showed increased confidence in expressing ideas and presenting their work. Classroom observations revealed that students were willing to speak in front of peers, explain their reasoning, and defend their viewpoints during collaborative tasks. This confidence was supported by a learning environment that encouraged participation and valued student voice. Teachers created opportunities for students to engage in dialogue, which allowed them to develop communication skills alongside academic competencies. The growth in confidence reflects the impact of a learning culture that recognizes students as active contributors to knowledge construction. Studies indicate that supportive classroom environments contribute to the

development of self-efficacy, which influences students' willingness to participate and persist in learning tasks (Bandura, 1997).

The development of learning autonomy was evident in students' ability to regulate their own learning processes. Students demonstrated skills in planning tasks, organizing materials, and monitoring their progress during project activities. They were able to evaluate their work and make adjustments based on feedback from teachers and peers. This capacity for self-regulation indicates that students were not only acquiring knowledge but also developing strategies for independent learning. Autonomy in learning involves cognitive, motivational, and behavioral components that enable students to take control of their educational experiences. Research highlights that self-regulated learning is associated with improved academic performance and long-term learning outcomes (Pintrich, 2004).

Students' ability to take initiative became a defining feature of classroom dynamics. They engaged in tasks without waiting for direct instruction, explored solutions to problems, and collaborated with peers to complete assignments. This initiative reflects a shift from dependency on teacher guidance toward independent problem-solving. Students approached challenges with curiosity and persistence, which are essential attributes for lifelong learning. The presence of such behaviors suggests that the learning environment supported the development of intrinsic motivation. Autonomy-supportive teaching practices have been shown to enhance students' engagement and willingness to take initiative in learning activities (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010).

The alignment between leadership vision and instructional practices played a significant role in sustaining these outcomes. Visionary leadership ensured that teachers consistently applied student-centered approaches that promote character and autonomy. Teachers received continuous support and guidance, which enabled them to maintain the quality of instructional practices across classrooms. This consistency created a stable learning environment where students could develop habits of responsibility and independence over time. The coherence between leadership direction and classroom implementation is essential for achieving meaningful educational outcomes. Research suggests that alignment within school systems strengthens the impact of instructional strategies on student learning (Robinson, 2011).

The classroom environment also contributed to the development of social responsibility among students. Collaborative activities required students to share roles, negotiate decisions, and support one another in achieving common goals. These experiences fostered a sense of community and mutual respect. Students learned to value diversity of perspectives and to resolve conflicts through discussion. Social interaction became an integral part of learning, reinforcing both character development and academic achievement. Social learning theories emphasize that interaction with peers plays a critical role in shaping behavior and cognitive development (Wentzel, 2012).

Assessment practices supported the development of both character and autonomy by focusing on process as well as outcomes. Teachers evaluated students' participation, collaboration, and ability to reflect on their learning. Feedback was provided in a constructive manner, encouraging students to improve their performance and take responsibility for their progress. This approach enabled students to understand their strengths and areas for improvement, which is essential for developing self-awareness. Assessment that emphasizes growth and reflection contributes to the formation of independent learners who are capable of evaluating their own learning processes (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

The discussion indicates that the integration of visionary leadership and the Merdeka Curriculum created a learning environment that supports holistic student development. Students developed not only academic competencies but also personal and social qualities that are essential for their future growth. The improvement in character and autonomy reflects the effectiveness of instructional practices that prioritize active engagement, reflection, and collaboration. The case of MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir demonstrates that curriculum implementation supported by strong leadership can produce sustainable educational impact.

The findings suggest that fostering student character and autonomy requires a comprehensive approach that integrates leadership, pedagogy, and assessment. Visionary leadership provides direction and support, while student-centered instruction creates opportunities for meaningful learning experiences. The interaction between these elements enables students to develop responsibility, confidence, and independence. This study contributes to the understanding of how leadership-driven curriculum implementation can enhance both character formation and learning autonomy in elementary education.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The findings confirm that visionary leadership plays a central role in shaping the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary education. The principal at MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir demonstrated the ability to translate educational vision into concrete instructional practices through consistent communication, mentoring, and professional support. This leadership approach created a shared understanding among teachers regarding the importance of student-centered learning, character development, and autonomy. Teachers responded positively by adjusting their instructional strategies and engaging in collaborative practices that strengthened curriculum implementation. The presence of a clear

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vision supported by continuous guidance contributed to the development of a professional culture oriented toward innovation and improvement.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum resulted in meaningful changes in classroom practices and student behavior. Teachers adopted facilitative roles that encouraged students to explore, reflect, and take responsibility for their learning. Students demonstrated improvement in character through responsible actions, cooperation, and respect for others. Learning autonomy developed as students became more capable of managing tasks, making decisions, and evaluating their progress. These outcomes indicate that the integration of leadership and pedagogy created a learning environment that supports both academic and personal development. The consistency between leadership direction and instructional practices enabled students to experience structured yet flexible learning processes.

The study highlights the importance of aligning leadership vision with instructional practices to achieve sustainable educational outcomes. Visionary leadership provides direction and motivation, while effective teaching strategies create opportunities for meaningful learning experiences. The interaction between these elements supports the development of student character and autonomy in a comprehensive manner. The case of MI Mambaul Hikam Ngubalan Kalidawir demonstrates that strong leadership can sustain curriculum reform and enhance the quality of learning. Future efforts should focus on strengthening leadership capacity, supporting teacher professional development, and expanding the implementation of student-centered approaches to achieve broader educational impact.

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