

# Implementation of the Principal's Democratic Leadership Style in the Independent Learning Curriculum

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## Abstract

The Merdeka Belajar curriculum is a new education policy in Indonesia that gives greater autonomy to schools. Its successful implementation depends on the leadership of the principal, in which the democratic leadership style is considered effective. This study aims to explore in depth the application of the principal's democratic leadership style in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Qualitative research with case studies at SMK Aviation PBD using interviews, observations, and documentation studies. Data analysis is carried out inductively by data reduction, data presentation, and conclusions. The results showed that school principals apply a democratic leadership style by involving stakeholders, giving teachers space to innovate, and facilitating collaboration between teachers. This creates a participatory and collaborative climate that supports curriculum implementation. However, challenges such as teacher resistance, lack of facilities, and lack of parental understanding were also found.

**Keywords:** Democratic leadership, school principal, implementation of the Merdeka curriculum.

## Introduction

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is the latest education policy launched by the Government of Indonesia through Permendikbud No. 82 of 2022 (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This curriculum aims to create a learning process that is more meaningful, fun, and in accordance with the interests and talents of students. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum provides flexibility for schools to develop local content and adapt learning methods to the characteristics of students and the local environment. This is the government's effort to improve the quality of education in Indonesia and prepare a more competitive young generation in an increasingly dynamic and challenging global era.

This curriculum is considered important because it is an effort to overcome various problems in the Indonesian education system which has tended to be rigid, too oriented to national exams, and lacks students' critical thinking skills and creativity. With a more flexible and student-centered approach, it is hoped that the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum can improve the quality of education and produce graduates who are better prepared to face future challenges.

One of the main principles in the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is the granting of greater autonomy to schools in developing the curriculum and learning process. Schools are given the flexibility to develop local content in accordance with regional characteristics, culture, and local potential (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This aims to make the learning process more contextual, relevant, and in accordance with local needs and potential. In addition, teachers are also encouraged to explore various active learning methods such as project-based learning, outdoor learning, or collaborative learning that actively involves students in the learning process.

The successful implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum depends heavily on the leadership of the school principal (Wahyudi et al., 2019; Firmansyah & Sukma, 2021). The headmaster has a strategic role in facilitating, coordinating, and motivating all stakeholders to actively participate in the process of implementing the new curriculum. One leadership style that is considered effective in this context is the democratic leadership style.

The democratic leadership style prioritizes participation, collaboration, and involvement of all members of the organization in decision making (Yukl, 2013; Rusyan, 2013). Principals who adopt this leadership style tend to open discussion rooms, value input from subordinates, and delegate responsibilities proportionally. Thus, it is expected to create a conducive work climate, a high sense of ownership, and collective commitment in implementing the curriculum (Mulyasa, 2015). This is very important considering that the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum demands adaptation and innovation in the learning process in accordance with local needs and characteristics.

The implementation of a democratic leadership style by school principals can facilitate the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in several ways. First, principals can involve teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders in the planning and decision-making process related to curriculum implementation. This stakeholder involvement can increase a sense of ownership and shared responsibility towards the successful implementation of the curriculum (Andriani et al., 2018). In addition, their involvement can also ensure that the curriculum developed is appropriate to local needs and contexts, so that the learning process becomes more meaningful and relevant for students.

Second, the principal can provide space for teachers to innovate in designing learning methods that suit students' interests and talents. With a democratic approach, school principals can encourage teachers to explore various creative and fun learning methods, such as project-based learning, outdoor learning, or collaborative learning (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This is in line with the principles of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum which emphasizes a meaningful and contextual learning process.

Third, school principals can facilitate collaboration and share experiences among teachers in implementing the curriculum. By collaborating and sharing experiences, teachers can learn from each other, find solutions to the problems faced, and improve the quality of the learning process on an ongoing basis (Supriadi et al., 2020). This can be done through discussion forums, workshops, or professional learning communities facilitated by democratic principals.

Several previous studies have examined the influence of democratic leadership style on curriculum implementation, but are still limited to the context of previous curricula such as the 2013 Curriculum (Fatmawati, 2017; Supriyanto et al., 2020). The results of these studies generally show that democratic leadership styles have a positive impact on the success of curriculum implementation. However, the characteristics of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum that provide greater autonomy to schools make the context of its implementation different. Therefore, this study intends to explore in depth the application of democratic leadership style by school principals in implementing the relatively new Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

This research is important to do because it can provide an overview of effective leadership strategies in implementing new education policies, especially the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. The results of this study are expected to be a reference for school principals and other stakeholders in an effort to improve the quality of education in Indonesia through the implementation of a curriculum that is in accordance with local needs and characteristics. In addition, this research can also make a theoretical contribution in the development of the

concept of democratic leadership in the context of education and curriculum implementation that is adaptive to policy change.

## Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. The qualitative approach was chosen to be able to gain a deep understanding of the application of the principal's democratic leadership style in implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Case studies were conducted in schools that have implemented the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum for at least one academic year. This research was carried out at SMK Aviation PBD. The criteria for selecting research sites include: (1) the school has implemented the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum for at least one academic year, (2) the principal applies a democratic leadership style based on initial assessment, and (3) the school is willing to be researched. Schools that meet these criteria are then selected as research samples.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies. In-depth interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, school administration, and other staff involved in curriculum implementation. This interview aims to obtain data on the implementation of the principal's democratic leadership style and the implementation process of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Observations were made on the learning process in class, coordination meetings, and other activities related to curriculum implementation. This observation aims to directly observe the application of the principal's democratic leadership style and its impact on the curriculum implementation process. Documentation studies are carried out on school documents such as lesson plans, activity reports, meeting minutes, and other supporting documents relevant to the research. This documentation study aims to complement the data obtained from interviews and observations.

Data analysis is carried out inductively, by following the following steps: (1) data reduction, (2) data presentation, and (3) conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction is carried out by sorting and summarizing data relevant to the research focus. The presentation of data is carried out in the form of narrative text, charts, or tables to facilitate drawing conclusions. Drawing conclusions is done by interpreting the data that has been presented and relating it to previous theories or research. To ensure the validity of the data, this study used source and method triangulation techniques (Creswell, 2014). Source triangulation is done by comparing data obtained from different sources (principals, teachers, parents, and local governments). Triangulation of methods is performed by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation studies. In addition, researchers also conduct member checking by returning the results of data analysis to participants to ensure the accuracy of the data and the researcher's interpretation.

## Results

This study examines in depth the application of democratic leadership style by the principal of SMK Flight PBD in the implementation of the relatively new Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with various relevant parties, direct observations in the field, and documentation studies. After going through an inductive data analysis process, several important findings were found that illustrate the application of the principal's democratic leadership style in implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

The first finding is that the headmaster involves all stakeholders in the planning, decision-making, and evaluation process related to curriculum implementation. This is reflected in the statement of one of the teachers in the interview:

"The principal always invites us to discuss and provide input in every planning related to this new curriculum. He also often holds meetings with the school committee involving parents."

The involvement of these various parties ensures that the curriculum developed is appropriate to local needs and contexts, so that the learning process becomes more meaningful and relevant for students. In addition, their involvement also increases a sense of ownership and shared responsibility towards the successful implementation of the curriculum.

The second finding shows that school principals provide ample space for teachers to innovate in designing learning methods that suit students' interests and talents. In classroom observations, it can be seen that some teachers have implemented innovative learning methods and actively involve students in the learning process, such as project-based learning, outdoor learning, or collaborative learning. This is in line with the principles of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum which emphasizes a meaningful and contextual learning process. One teacher revealed:

"The headmaster was very supportive of us trying new methods of teaching, such as project-based learning or outdoor learning. He believes that this will make students more interested and engaged in learning".

The third finding is that principals facilitate collaboration and sharing experiences among teachers in implementing the curriculum. The headmaster forms a professional learning community (KBP) in the school, where teachers can share experiences, discuss problems faced, and find solutions together. One of the teachers explained:

"This KBP really helps us to share tips and tricks in applying new learning methods. We can also discuss the obstacles we face and find solutions together".

Through KBP, teachers can learn from each other and improve the quality of the learning process on an ongoing basis.

The above findings show that the implementation of democratic leadership style by school principals has a positive impact on the successful implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. By involving various stakeholders, providing space for teachers to innovate, and facilitating collaboration between teachers, principals are able to create a participatory and collaborative climate in curriculum implementation. This is in line with the principles of democratic leadership style that prioritizes participation, collaboration, and involvement of all members of the organization in decision making (Yukl, 2013; Rusyan, 2013). With a conducive climate and a high sense of ownership, it is expected to increase collective commitment in curriculum implementation (Mulyasa, 2015). This finding is also in line with previous research showing that democratic leadership style has a positive impact on the success of curriculum implementation (Fatmawati, 2017; Supriyanto et al., 2020).

However, this study also identified several challenges in the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum at SMK Aviation PBD. One of the main challenges is the resistance of some teachers who are still comfortable with conventional learning methods. As one teacher put it:

"I admit that this new learning method is quite challenging for me. I'm still more comfortable with the lecture method because it's more manageable."

This is due to several factors, such as old habits that are difficult to change, lack of understanding of new learning methods, or concerns about heavier workloads. Therefore, more intensive efforts are needed from school principals to motivate and support teachers in adopting

more innovative learning methods, such as training, mentoring, and appreciation of innovation efforts made by teachers.

Another challenge found was the lack of resources and support facilities in schools. In observation, it can be seen that some classes lack supporting equipment such as computers or adequate internet access. This was acknowledged by the principal:

"We still lack supporting facilities to optimally implement new learning methods.

However, we continue to work to complete the facility gradually".

The lack of these facilities can be an obstacle in the implementation of an optimal curriculum, especially for learning methods that require special equipment or extensive access to information. Therefore, efforts are needed to increase the budget and cooperation with other parties, such as local governments or industry partners, to meet the needs of these facilities.

In addition, this study also found other challenges such as lack of understanding from some parents about the concept and purpose of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Some parents still consider that good learning is learning that focuses on mastering the subject matter cognitively, so they do not support more active and contextual learning methods. This can certainly hinder optimal curriculum implementation, given the importance of parental support and involvement in their children's education process.

Despite facing several challenges, this study shows that the implementation of democratic leadership style by school principals has an important role in facilitating, coordinating, and motivating all stakeholders to actively participate in the process of implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. By creating a participatory and collaborative climate, it is expected to improve the quality of the learning process and achieve the goals of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, which is to create a learning process that is more meaningful, fun, and in accordance with the interests and talents of students.

To overcome these challenges, principals need to take several strategic steps. First, school principals need to continue to socialize the concepts and objectives of the Free Learning Curriculum to all stakeholders, especially teachers and parents. This can be done through regular meetings, workshops, or information media such as school newsletters. A good understanding of the new curriculum will reduce resistance and increase support from various parties.

Second, school principals need to provide intensive training and mentoring to teachers to improve their ability to apply innovative learning methods and in accordance with the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Training can include active learning techniques, effective classroom management, or the development of engaging learning media. Mentoring can be done through mentoring programs or lesson study, where teachers can learn from each other and share experiences.

Third, school principals need to strive to increase budgets and collaborate with other parties, such as local governments or industry partners, to meet the needs of supporting facilities needed in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Facilities such as laboratories, well-equipped libraries, or adequate internet access are essential to support innovative and contextual learning methods.

Fourth, school principals need to continue to facilitate and encourage collaboration between teachers through professional learning communities (KBP) or other forums. This collaboration is not only useful for sharing experiences and solutions, but also can increase teacher motivation and enthusiasm in implementing the new curriculum.

Finally, school principals need to involve parents and the community more actively in the implementation process of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Their involvement can be in the form of participation in learning activities, such as being resource persons or mentors in outdoor

learning or project-based learning. By involving parents and the community, it is hoped that it can increase their support and trust in this new curriculum.

Overall, this study provides an in-depth picture of the application of democratic leadership style by school principals in implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. The findings in this study can be a reference for school principals and other stakeholders in an effort to improve the quality of education in Indonesia through the implementation of curriculum that is in accordance with local needs and characteristics. In addition, this research can also make a theoretical contribution in the development of the concept of democratic leadership in the context of education and curriculum implementation that is adaptive to policy change.

## Discussion

The above findings show that the implementation of the principal's democratic leadership style has a positive impact on the successful implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. By involving various stakeholders, providing space for teachers to innovate, and facilitating collaboration between teachers, principals are able to create a participatory and collaborative climate in curriculum implementation. This is in line with the principles of democratic leadership style that prioritizes participation, collaboration, and involvement of all members of the organization (Yukl, 2013; Rusyan, 2013). A conducive climate and a high sense of ownership are expected to increase collective commitment in curriculum implementation (Mulyasa, 2015).

This finding is in line with previous research showing that democratic leadership style has a positive impact on the success of curriculum implementation (Fatmawati, 2017; Supriyanto et al., 2020). Although previous research focused on the context of the 2013 Curriculum, the findings in this study show that democratic leadership styles are also effective in implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum which gives greater autonomy to schools.

The results of this study have important practical and theoretical implications. In practical terms, these findings can be a reference for school principals and other stakeholders in an effort to improve the quality of education through the implementation of curricula that are in accordance with local needs and characteristics. Principals can adopt a democratic leadership style by involving all stakeholders, providing space for teachers to innovate, and facilitating collaboration between teachers.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of the concept of democratic leadership in the context of education and curriculum implementation that is adaptive to policy change. The findings of this study reinforce the theory that democratic leadership styles can create a participatory and collaborative climate conducive to organizational change, including in the implementation of new curricula.

While this study provides valuable insights, there are some limitations to be aware of. First, the study was only conducted in one school, so the generalization of the results may be limited. Second, the study focused only on the perspectives of principals, teachers, and school staff, while the perspectives of students and parents were less explored in depth. Third, this research was conducted in the early stages of implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, so that the long-term impact of democratic leadership styles cannot be fully observed.

Based on the findings and limitations in this study, some suggestions for future research are: Conduct similar studies in several schools with different characteristics to improve the generalization of research results. Explore the perspectives of students and parents in more depth regarding the application of the principal's democratic leadership style in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Conducted a longitudinal study to observe the long-term impact of democratic leadership style on the successful implementation of the

Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Examine other factors that can affect the successful implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, such as school organizational culture, teacher competence, or local government support. Further research in this area will provide a more comprehensive understanding of effective leadership strategies in implementing curriculum changes and education policy in general.

## Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion, several important conclusions can be drawn. First, the implementation of the democratic leadership style by the principal at SMK Aviation PBD has a positive impact on the successful implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Second, the principal involves various stakeholders, provides space for teachers to innovate, and facilitates collaboration among teachers in the implementation of the curriculum. Third, the implementation of the democratic leadership style at SMK Aviation PBD creates a participatory and collaborative climate, increasing the sense of ownership and collective commitment in curriculum implementation. However, some challenges were also encountered, such as the resistance of some teachers, lack of supporting facilities, and lack of understanding from parents about the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

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