THE PRINCIPAL'S LEADERSHIP IN MANAGING STUDENT DIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM

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Abstract:
This study aims to describe and analyze the role of the principal in managing student diversity during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MA Wanagading. Student diversity including social, cultural, academic, and learning needs demands school leadership that is inclusive and adaptable to change. While the Merdeka Curriculum has been widely studied, there is still a lack of research focusing specifically on leadership dynamics within Islamic schools, particularly in managing diverse student populations. This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal, teachers, and students, as well as through observation of learning activities and documentation of school policies. The data were analyzed descriptively through the processes of reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that the principal acts as an instructional leader, an innovation facilitator, and a promoter of an inclusive culture within the school. Several strategies were implemented, including teacher training on differentiated instruction, the development of adaptive learning policies, and strengthened communication with parents and the community to support student diversity. The study concludes that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum heavily relies on the quality of school leadership in managing student diversity. A transformative and collaborative principal role creates a more equitable, flexible, and student-centered learning ecosystem. This study offers a practical model for madrasah principals to balance curriculum flexibility with inclusivity, serving as a reference for diversity-based educational policy development.

Abstrak:
Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan dan menganalisis peran kepala madrasah dalam mengelola keberagaman siswa selama pelaksanaan Kurikulum Merdeka di MA Wanagading. Keberagaman siswa yang meliputi aspek sosial, budaya, akademik, dan kebutuhan pembelajaran menuntut kepemimpinan sekolah yang inklusif dan adaptif terhadap perubahan. Meskipun Kurikulum Merdeka telah banyak diteliti, masih terdapat kekurangan penelitian yang secara khusus menyoroti dinamika kepemimpinan di sekolah Islam, terutama dalam mengelola populasi siswa yang beragam. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan kepala madrasah, guru, dan siswa, serta melalui observasi aktivitas pembelajaran dan dokumentasi kebijakan sekolah. Data dianalisis secara deskriptif melalui proses reduksi, penyajian, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepala madrasah berperan sebagai pemimpin instruksional, fasilitator inovasi, dan penggerak budaya inklusif di dalam sekolah. Beberapa strategi diterapkan, antara lain pelatihan guru mengenai pembelajaran diferensiasi, pengembangan

kebijakan pembelajaran yang adaptif, serta penguatan komunikasi dengan orang tua dan masyarakat untuk mendukung keberagaman siswa. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa keberhasilan pelaksanaan Kurikulum Merdeka sangat bergantung pada kualitas kepemimpinan sekolah dalam mengelola keberagaman siswa. Peran kepala madrasah yang transformatif dan kolaboratif terbukti mampu menciptakan ekosistem pembelajaran yang lebih adil, fleksibel, dan berpusat pada siswa. Penelitian ini menawarkan model praktis bagi kepala madrasah dalam menyeimbangkan fleksibilitas kurikulum dengan inklusivitas, serta menjadi referensi bagi pengembangan kebijakan pendidikan berbasis keberagaman.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's education landscape is currently undergoing a significant transformation with the introduction of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, a pedagogical approach that emphasizes flexibility, autonomous learning, and the recognition of students' uniqueness and diversity. This curriculum optimizes students' potential through contextual, collaborative learning, focusing on character-building and 21st-century competencies (Qolbi & Susiawati, 2025). In this context, the diversity of students across social, economic, cultural, religious, ethnic, academic, and special needs dimensions presents a major challenge that must be addressed wisely by all school stakeholders.

In facing these challenges, school principals play a strategic role in ensuring the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* aligns with the principles of inclusivity and equity. Principals are not merely administrators but are also expected to act as instructional leaders responsible for creating adaptive learning environments that value diversity (Jonison, Maulana, & Yusuf, 2024). This role requires principals to formulate data-driven policies, strengthen teachers' capacity to implement differentiated instruction and foster synergistic communication between schools and communities as part of the broader educational ecosystem.

Previous studies have shown that effective school leadership can accelerate the adoption of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and cultivate a student-centered learning culture (Putra & Lutfiana, 2024). Principals who internalize the spirit of independent learning tend to develop internal policies that accommodate diverse student needs while also encouraging innovation and collaboration among teachers. Managing student diversity is also closely linked to student well-being, which plays a crucial role in fostering a safe, positive, and participatory learning climate (Husain, Rahayu, & Samad, 2023). Leadership that prioritizes student well-being is believed to enhance students' sense of belonging, active engagement, and overall motivation to learn.

Despite the widespread adoption of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, its implementation across various educational institutions continues to face obstacles. A primary issue is the limited understanding among school principals and teachers

regarding the concept of differentiated learning, alongside a lack of teaching modules tailored to the local context and characteristics of learners. Additionally, disparities persist in training quality, the development of the school operational curriculum (KOS), and the management of human resources essential to the successful implementation of the curriculum (Lisan, Nuryani, & Fachruddin, 2024).

These challenges are further amplified in the context of Islamic schools such as MA Wanagading, which serves students from highly diverse backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic status, culture, and learning needs. As a faith-based educational institution, MA Wanagading faces the dual challenge of harmonizing religious values with the inclusive and contextual principles of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Hence, the role of the principal becomes critically important. It requires leadership that not only comprehends the curriculum's conceptual substance but also demonstrates social sensitivity, managerial skills, and a commitment to the values of inclusivity and educational justice.

Based on this background, this study aims to address two main research questions. First, what is the role of the school principal in managing student diversity during the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* at MA Wanagading? Second, what strategies are employed by the principal to address diversity-related challenges in creating an inclusive and contextual learning environment? By analyzing these two core aspects, this research is expected to contribute to the development of a transformative, adaptive leadership model for Islamic schools, oriented toward strengthening educational equity.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. The qualitative approach is chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of how the principal's leadership manages student diversity during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MA Wanagading. The case study design allows the researcher to focus closely on specific contexts and phenomena in a detailed and comprehensive manner (Tharaba & Wahyudin, 2024). Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal, teachers, and selected students as key informants, participant observation within the school environment, and documentation related to implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Data triangulation was applied to enhance the validity and reliability of the data by cross-verifying information from multiple sources.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively through stages of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This process follows the data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which helps researchers organize and interpret data systematically (Tharaba & Wahyudin, 2024). According to Sugiyono, data validity in qualitative research can be ensured through triangulation, member checking, and audit trail, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of the findings. Accordingly, this study employed these techniques to ensure the accuracy of data and interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Managing Student Diversity within the Merdeka Curriculum Framework

Field observations at MA Wanagading revealed significant diversity among students, particularly in terms of academic readiness and socio-economic status. During classroom visits, it was evident that students' learning abilities varied widely; some demonstrated strong competencies and excelled in certain subjects, while others required additional support to keep pace with the curriculum. Moreover, many students come from low to lower-middle-income families, lacking adequate access to digital devices and stable internet connections. This digital divide posed a considerable challenge in participating fully in the online and blended learning components integral to the Merdeka Curriculum.

This scenario illustrates the critical need for schools to manage such diversity carefully to prevent disparities in learning outcomes. The principal emphasized in a detailed interview,

> *"We strive to deeply understand each student's background. This understanding is crucial so that we can tailor teaching methods to meet their specific needs and conditions, especially considering the economic and cultural diversity present in our school."* (Interview, March 15, 2025).

This statement underscores the school leadership's awareness of the complex challenges brought about by student heterogeneity and their commitment to implementing teaching strategies that are not only aligned with curricular standards but also grounded in the socio-cultural realities of the learners.

This finding aligns with official guidance from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek, 2022), which stresses that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation largely depends on a school's capacity to adapt the learning process according to the real-life conditions and unique needs of each student, especially in heterogeneous classroom settings. The curriculum promotes student-centered learning principles, requiring teachers to comprehensively understand each student's characteristics, potential, and learning needs to design inclusive and effective learning experiences.

Furthermore, Arifin highlights the critical influence of socio-cultural factors on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction. He argues that cultural background, family values, habits, and socio-economic conditions significantly affect how students respond to teaching methods and the learning environment. Ignoring these factors can lead to ineffective differentiation strategies and may exacerbate learning gaps among students.

Therefore, the systematic mapping of student characteristics by the school is an indispensable foundation for the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MA Wanagading. The principal and teachers collaborate to identify students' learning needs, barriers, and strengths, enabling the development of adaptive and responsive instructional strategies. This process involves adjusting

teaching methods, providing varied learning resources, and offering additional support to students who need it.

This inclusive approach not only fulfills the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum but also reflects educational equity principles, ensuring that every student has equal opportunities to develop according to their potential and needs. Hence, effective management of student diversity is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving holistic and sustainable educational goals at MA Wanagading.

Visionary Leadership as a Catalyst for Curriculum Innovation

Visionary leadership by the principal plays a crucial role in advancing curriculum innovation and nurturing an inclusive school culture. This leadership extends beyond academic management by embedding local cultural and religious values into school policies, creating a holistic and contextually relevant educational vision (Leithwood et al., 2020). At MA Wanagading, the principal consistently motivates teachers to perceive diversity as an asset and encourages pedagogical innovations that align with local community needs.

Evidence from interviews highlights the impact of this leadership style on teachers. One teacher remarked,

> *"The principal's vision inspires us to see diversity as a strength, not a barrier. His guidance helps us incorporate local culture and values into our teaching."* (Teacher Interview, March 18, 2025).

Recent research supports this perspective. For example, Nguyen and Walker found that transformational leadership with a strong cultural responsiveness dimension positively influences teacher motivation and effective curriculum implementation in diverse educational settings. Similarly, Johnson and Martinez emphasize that culturally responsive leadership enhances school climate and promotes inclusive practices that support student success.

Participatory Supervision Enhancing Teacher Capacity

Observations at MA Wanagading highlight that the school regularly organizes teacher forums and collaborative workshops designed to blend local wisdom with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. These professional development sessions encourage teachers to engage in reflective practice and peer-to-peer learning, fostering a community of educators committed to continuous improvement. The forums serve as vital platforms where teachers exchange ideas, share challenges, and collaboratively develop solutions tailored to their students' diverse needs.

A senior teacher emphasized the impact of this supervision approach during an interview:

> *"Participatory supervision encourages us to share challenges and solutions openly. It makes the learning community stronger."* (Interview, March 20, 2025).

This statement underscores how a participatory, empathetic supervisory model cultivates trust, openness, and mutual support among teachers, which are essential for successful curriculum implementation.

Supporting this, Yusuf and Hidayati argue that empathetic and collaborative supervision is crucial, particularly in schools with limited resources. Their study found that such supervision models empower teachers by validating their experiences, promoting professional dialogue, and enabling adaptive instructional practices, which are vital for effectively implementing innovative curricula like the Merdeka Curriculum.

By fostering an environment where teachers actively participate in supervision processes and professional learning communities, MA Wanagading demonstrates how participatory leadership contributes to teacher capacity-building and ultimately enhances the quality of education provided.

Fostering an Inclusive and Adaptive School Culture

Observations at MA Wanagading revealed that classroom projects frequently incorporated local socio-cultural themes, fostering a learning environment grounded in the community's cultural heritage. Teachers actively rewarded students who demonstrated behaviors aligned with tolerance and cooperation, thereby reinforcing positive social values. Additionally, collaborative activities that involved students from different grade levels were common, promoting cross-age learning and peer support.

A student reflected on this experience, stating, *"Working with classmates from different backgrounds has taught me patience and respect."* (Student Interview, March 22, 2025).

This testimony illustrates the development of essential social-emotional skills such as empathy and respect within an inclusive school culture.

These practices align with findings by Sari and Rahmawati (2021), who emphasize that fostering an inclusive school culture significantly enhances student engagement and character development. Their study also highlights that integrating religious values into school culture adds a unique dimension that strengthens community bonds and supports moral growth among students.

Challenges and Adaptive Leadership Strategies

Observations indicate that teachers at MA Wanagading face considerable challenges in balancing the demands of administrative responsibilities with the need to innovate in teaching practices. Additionally, limited access to reliable internet connectivity has hindered the effective implementation of blended learning modalities, which are a critical component of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The principal candidly acknowledged these obstacles during an interview: *"We face constraints like technology gaps and heavy administrative load, so we simplify processes and engage community resources to overcome them."* (Interview, March 15, 2025).

This admission reflects an adaptive leadership approach that seeks pragmatic solutions within existing limitations.

Banks underscores the significance of adaptive leadership in addressing structural barriers to equity and inclusion in education. He argues that effective leaders must be flexible and innovative, leveraging available resources and community partnerships to sustain educational reforms despite challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study found that student diversity at MA Wanagading is wide-ranging, including differences in academic ability and socio-economic backgrounds. The principal plays a crucial role by understanding each student's needs and supporting teachers to adjust teaching methods accordingly. The principal's visionary leadership encourages innovation and the integration of local cultural and religious values into the curriculum, creating an inclusive and meaningful learning environment. Participatory supervision strengthens teacher capacity through regular collaboration and discussion.

Adaptive school culture is also developed by promoting tolerance, student collaboration, and incorporating local and religious values. Despite challenges such as limited technology and administrative burdens, the principal applies adaptive strategies to overcome these obstacles. Overall, responsive and adaptive leadership is key to successfully managing student diversity and implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at MA Wanagading.

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