

Instructional Principal Leadership in Merdeka Curriculum Implementation (DPL-8): CIPP Evaluation in Senior High Schools

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Abstract:

This study examines how principal leadership supports the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School using the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) evaluation framework. A qualitative approach was employed through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving the principal, vice principal for curriculum, teachers, and education staff. The CIPP model was applied to assess school readiness (context), resource and capacity support (input), the enactment of teaching and supervision (process), and observable outcomes such as teacher practices and student engagement (product). The findings suggest that the principal aligns school vision with curriculum principles (context), supports teacher capacity and learning facilities (input), guides implementation through supervision and collaborative practices (process), and is associated with increased student participation and a more collaborative school climate (product). Learning initiatives, including project-based activities and school-based programs, illustrate how curriculum principles are translated into practice, although variations in teacher readiness and resource use were still observed. Practically, the study suggests that principals may benefit from balancing vision-setting with sustained instructional support, strengthening teacher mentoring, and coordinating resources and partnerships to support implementation. For policymakers, the results may inform leadership development programs that integrate managerial and instructional competencies. This study is limited to a single school context with a small number of participants, so the findings are not intended to be generalized but may offer insight for similar settings.

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana pimpinan kepala sekolah mendukung implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di SMA Negeri Sambungmacan 1 menggunakan kerangka evaluasi CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product). Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen yang melibatkan kepala sekolah, wakil kepala sekolah untuk kurikulum, guru, dan staf pendidikan. Model CIPP diterapkan untuk menilai kesiapan sekolah (konteks), dukungan sumber daya dan kapasitas (input), pemberlakuan pengajaran dan pengawasan (proses), dan hasil yang dapat diamati seperti praktik guru dan keterlibatan siswa (produk). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kepala sekolah menyalurkan visi sekolah dengan prinsip-prinsip kurikulum (konteks), mendukung kapasitas guru dan fasilitas pembelajaran (input), memandu implementasi melalui pengawasan dan praktik kolaboratif (proses), dan dikaitkan dengan peningkatan partisipasi siswa dan iklim sekolah yang lebih

kolaboratif (produk). Inisiatif pembelajaran, termasuk kegiatan berbasis proyek dan program berbasis sekolah, menggambarkan bagaimana prinsip-prinsip kurikulum diterjemahkan ke dalam praktik, meskipun variasi dalam kesiapan guru dan penggunaan sumber daya masih diamati. Secara praktis, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kepala sekolah dapat memperoleh manfaat dari menyeimbangkan penetapan visi dengan dukungan instruksional yang berkelanjutan, memperkuat pendampingan guru, dan mengoordinasikan sumber daya dan kemitraan untuk mendukung implementasi. Bagi pembuat kebijakan, hasilnya dapat menginformasikan program pengembangan kepemimpinan yang mengintegrasikan kompetensi manajerial dan instruksional. Penelitian ini terbatas pada satu konteks sekolah dengan jumlah peserta yang sedikit, sehingga temuan ini tidak dimaksudkan untuk digeneralisasi tetapi dapat menawarkan wawasan untuk pengaturan serupa.

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INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum is present as an innovation in national education policy that emphasizes flexible, competency-oriented, and nurturing student character according to the Pancasila Student Profile. The implementation of this policy at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School is based on systematic planning as stated in the school program document, one of which is through the development of the *Deep Learning Teaching Module* which emphasizes the integration of *project-based learning (PjBL)*, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and the use of digital technology. This shows that the school has tried to translate the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum into real practices that are contextual, creative, and adaptive to the times (Marisa, 2021; Najib, 2025).

The principal plays a central role in overseeing the direction of the curriculum implementation. Under his leadership, various learning innovations emerged, such as collaboration between teachers across subjects (Arts and Culture, Mathematics, Sociology, and Economics), digital diagnostic assessments (through Gimkit, Quizizz, and Google Form), and the application of learning principles that are conscious, meaningful, and encouraging. This approach is not just an administrative implementation, but a tangible manifestation of transformational leadership that fosters a culture of collaborative and reflective learning in the school environment (Achmad Rasyid, Muhammad Alfa, Azhar, & Rizka, 2025).

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in schools also faces a number of challenges. Based on initial observations, there are still variations in teachers' readiness for the use of digital media, cross-field project management, and authentic assessments. This is where the role of the principal is important in ensuring the alignment of vision, improving teacher competence, and managing school resources optimally so that the implementation of the curriculum runs effectively (Putri & Dartim, 2025).

To obtain a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of the role of school

principals in this context, this study uses the CIPP (*Context, Input, Process, Product*) evaluation model developed by Stufflebeam (2003). Unlike descriptive or strategy-oriented approaches, the CIPP model enables a systematic and comprehensive evaluation by examining not only leadership practices but also contextual readiness, resource adequacy, implementation processes, and measurable outcomes. This integrative framework is particularly important in the context of curriculum transformation, where success depends on the alignment between policy, school capacity, and instructional practices. Therefore, the use of the CIPP model provides a more comprehensive and structured understanding of how principals influence curriculum implementation at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School (Syarifuddin, S., Niswanto, N., & Ismail, 2024).

Previous studies, such as (Anangsy & Arismunandar, 2024), emphasize the role of principals in shaping value-based school missions, while (Agustian, Hidayati, & Widodo, 2024) focuses on leadership strategies in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Similarly, (Annisa, Nasution, & Yahfizham, 2025) highlights principals' responsibilities in managing educational resources, and (Mukhlisin, Hartinah, & Sudiby, 2024) discusses managerial functions ranging from planning to supervision. However, these studies predominantly adopt descriptive and normative perspectives, concentrating on what principals do rather than how effective their roles are in practice. Critically, they lack a systematic evaluative framework that integrates multiple dimensions of implementation. This reveals a significant research gap: the absence of comprehensive evaluation models that can assess the effectiveness of principal leadership in curriculum transformation.

Addressing this gap, the present study offers a clear novelty by applying the CIPP model to evaluate the role of school principals in supporting the Merdeka Curriculum. This approach moves beyond merely describing leadership strategies by systematically assessing context readiness, input sufficiency, process quality, and product outcomes in an integrated manner. As such, this research contributes to the existing literature by providing a more robust analytical framework for understanding principal leadership in curriculum reform. Furthermore, the findings are expected to offer practical implications for school leaders and policymakers by delivering evidence-based insights to improve leadership effectiveness, strengthen teacher capacity, and foster adaptive and collaborative learning environments aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach using the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) evaluation model. This model was selected because it provides a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the principal's role in supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School. The context evaluation examines the school's background, needs, and readiness for curriculum transformation. Input evaluation focuses on the availability of infrastructure, learning resources, and teacher competencies. Process

evaluation analyzes how learning activities are implemented and how the principal exercises leadership during the process. Meanwhile, product evaluation assesses the outcomes of curriculum implementation, including its impact on teachers, students, and school performance(Waruwu, 2023).

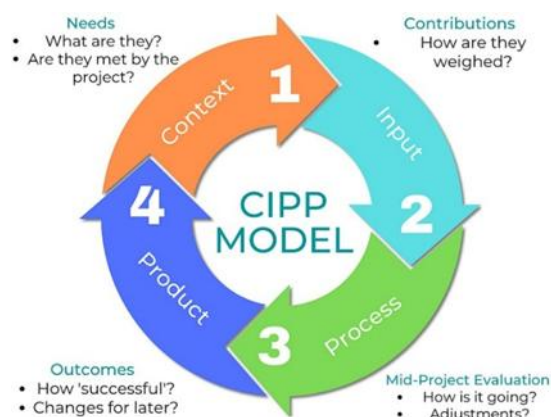


Figure 1. Key Components of the CIPP Evaluation Model and Relationships in the Program (Stufflebeam, 2003)

The subjects of this study consisted of one principal, one vice principal for curriculum, seven teachers from different subject areas, and two education staff members, totaling eleven participants. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: (1) direct involvement in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, (2) active participation in teaching, supervision, or administrative processes related to curriculum implementation, and (3) sufficient experience to provide in-depth and relevant information. The principal was selected due to their central role in leadership and decision-making; the vice principal for curriculum was chosen for their responsibility in curriculum planning and coordination; teachers were included to represent diverse instructional practices and classroom experiences; and education staff were selected to provide insights into administrative and technical support. This selection ensured that data were collected from multiple perspectives, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation process(Ardiansyah, Risnita, & Jailani, 2023).

The research instruments consisted of interview guidelines, observation sheets, and documentation checklists. The interview guidelines were designed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and strategies related to leadership and curriculum implementation. Observation sheets were used to systematically record behaviors, interactions, and learning activities in real classroom and school settings. Meanwhile, documentation checklists were utilized to examine relevant official documents, such as school work programs, curriculum plans, supervision records, and activity reports. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis using these instruments. The collected data were then analyzed using an interactive analysis model consisting of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, raw data from interviews, observations, and documents were

organized, coded, and categorized based on the four components of the CIPP model (context, input, process, and product). In the data display stage, the categorized data were presented in the form of narrative descriptions and thematic matrices to facilitate interpretation and comparison across data sources. In the conclusion drawing stage, patterns, relationships, and key findings were identified and continuously verified throughout the research process to ensure consistency and validity (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020).

To ensure data credibility and validity, this study applied triangulation of sources and methods. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from different informants (principal, teachers, and education staff) to identify consistency and differences in perspectives. Method triangulation was applied by cross-checking data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. For example, statements from interviews regarding leadership practices were validated through direct classroom observations and supported by documentary evidence such as supervision records and school reports. In addition, member checking was conducted by confirming findings with informants to ensure accuracy, while peer debriefing was used to obtain external validation and minimize researcher bias (Taherdoost, 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented based on the CIPP (*Context, Input, Process, Product*) evaluation framework which is used to analyze the role of school principals in supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School. The research data was obtained through in-depth interviews with 11 correspondents consisting of school principals, vice principals for curriculum, seven teachers from various subjects, and two education staff. The data is strengthened by direct observation of student learning and co-curricular activities, as well as a review of official school documents such as the Education Unit Curriculum (KSP), Deep Learning Teaching Modules, school principals' work programs, and academic supervision reports (Rohyadi & Rosmilawati, 2024). To clarify the operationalization of the evaluation model, the indicators and operational definitions used in this study are summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Indicators and Operational Definitions of the CIPP Model

Dimensions	Indicator	Operational Definition	Data Source
Context (Kontex)	Vision and goals of the school	Alignment of the school's vision and goals listed in the KSP with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum and Pancasila Student Profile	High school KSP documents, principal interview
	Curriculum socialization	The intensity and quality of socialization of the Merdeka Curriculum to teachers, students, and education staff	Meeting observations, teacher interviews
	Stakeholder support	Involvement of teachers, students, school committees, and parents in	Teacher interviews,

Input	Teacher competence	supporting DPL-8's academic and co-curricular activities The level of understanding and ability of teachers in designing and implementing project-based learning, as well as the use of digital media	documentation of school activities Teaching module documents, teacher interviews
	Facilities and infrastructure	Availability of learning facilities, including art rooms, laboratories, and technology support in learning and extracurricular activities	Facility observations, inventory documents
	Internal policy support	School principals' policies in the formation of curriculum development teams, strengthening digital literacy, and teacher competency improvement programs	School policy documents, principal interviews
Process (Proses)	Principal supervision	The frequency and quality of academic supervision carried out by school principals with a coaching and mentoring approach	Supervision reports, teacher interviews
	Implementation of co-curricular activities	Planning, implementation, and evaluation of co-curricular activities (such as <i>Deep Learning</i> and cross-disciplinary projects) that strengthen DPL-8	Observation of activities, co-curricular schedule documents
	Learning innovations	The use of active learning models such as <i>Project-Based Learning</i> (PjBL), digital technology integration, and cross-subject collaboration	Class observations, teacher interviews
Product	Student motivation and participation	Students' level of enthusiasm and involvement in learning and extracurricular activities	Class observations, student interviews
	Teacher empowerment	Teachers' perceptions of the principal's support in professional development and learning innovation	Teacher interviews, training documentation
	Collaborative school climate	The formation of a collaborative culture between teachers, students, and education staff in supporting the Independent Curriculum	Teacher interviews, documentation of school activities

To clarify the operationalization of the CIPP model, this study uses indicators formulated in the context of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMAN 1 Sambungmacan. In the Context dimension, the indicators are focused on aligning the vision and goals of the school listed in the Education Unit Curriculum (KSP) with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum and stakeholder involvement. The Input Dimension includes teacher competence, supporting facilities for learning and co-curricular activities, and internal policies that allocate resources. The Process dimension is focused on the academic supervision of the principal, the implementation of DPL-8 co-curricular activities that are integrated with school teaching modules, and project-based and digital learning innovations. Meanwhile, the Product dimension assesses student motivation and participation, teacher

professional empowerment, and the realization of a collaborative school climate (Mentang, 2025).

Furthermore, each component of the CIPP model contributed analytically to a deeper understanding of principal leadership in curriculum transformation. The Context dimension provided insight into how the principal shapes strategic direction by aligning school vision, policies, and stakeholder expectations with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. The Input dimension revealed the principal's role in ensuring institutional readiness through the provision and management of human resources, infrastructure, and policy support. The Process dimension highlighted how leadership is enacted in practice, particularly through academic supervision, facilitation of innovative learning, and continuous teacher support. Meanwhile, the Product dimension demonstrated the outcomes of leadership practices, including improvements in student engagement, teacher professional growth, and the development of a collaborative school culture. Through this structured contribution, the CIPP framework not only organizes the findings but also explains how different dimensions of leadership interact in shaping effective curriculum implementation.

The results of this research were obtained through in-depth interviews with 11 correspondents (principal, vice principal for curriculum, seven teachers, and two education staff), complemented by direct observation of the learning process and co-curricular activities, as well as a review of official documents including the high school KSP, Deep Learning Teaching Module, work programs, and supervision reports; All of these data sources were analyzed using the CIPP framework to provide a comprehensive picture of the role of school principals in supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in schools.

Context Evaluation

The context evaluation stage aims to assess the extent to which the vision, policy direction, and environmental conditions of Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School support the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. At this stage, the focus of analysis is directed to understand the philosophical foundation, institutional readiness, and social support that are the basis for curriculum implementation. Context evaluation is important because it provides an overview of the compatibility between the school's goals and the main principle of the Independent Curriculum, namely learning that is on the side of students and oriented towards strengthening the Eight Dimensions of the Graduate Profile (DPL-8).

The results of the evaluation show that Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School has a strong compatibility between the school's vision and the spirit of the Independent Curriculum. The school's vision that emphasizes the formation of students who are faithful, creative, adaptive, and globally competitive does not stop as a normative statement, but is actualized through various learning activities that foster students' independence and creativity. One of the concrete evidence can be

seen in the implementation of cross-disciplinary project-based learning in the subject of Cultural Arts developed by teacher Adhitya Wisnuwardhana Mustika Putra. In the project themed "Macrame", students not only learn fine art skills, but also apply mathematical concepts (through pattern calculation and symmetry), economics (selling value and entrepreneurship of works), sociology (socio-cultural functions of works), and history (the origin of craft traditions). This activity develops the values of creativity, collaboration, independence, communication, and critical reasoning, which are part of the DPL-8 dimension.

In addition to the learning aspect, the context findings show that the principal applies a visionary-participatory leadership pattern, which works through a vision alignment mechanism and repeated socialization. This mechanism has an impact on increasing teacher readiness and stakeholder support in receiving the Independent Curriculum. Through In House Training (IHT) activities, annual work meetings, and teacher reflection forums, the principal emphasized the importance of philosophical understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum and teacher autonomy in designing contextual learning. This socialization process encourages the birth of various creative learning initiatives that utilize digital technology such as Gimkit, Padlet, and Google Classroom for diagnostic assessments, reflections, and online discussions. This effort shows that school principals not only play an administrative role, but also as instructional leaders who are able to drive innovation among teachers.

In addition, support from school stakeholders is also an important part of the context of the success of the Independent Curriculum. The principal engages the school committee, parents, and student organizations to jointly strengthen project-based and character-based activities. One of the forms of collaboration is the flagship activity "Living Apothecary Plants: PMR WIRA SMAN 1 Sambungmacan", which not only fosters environmental awareness, but also teaches the values of mutual cooperation, social responsibility, and independence in the real context of daily life. This activity is also a means of internalizing the values of faith, critical reasoning, collaboration, and independence, in accordance with the spirit of strengthening DPL-8 in schools.

Thus, the context evaluation shows that Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School already has a strong ideological and social foundation to implement the Independent Curriculum. The principal succeeded in synergizing the school's vision with national policies, encouraging an innovative culture among teachers, and creating a collaborative learning ecosystem between the school and the community. This contextual readiness is an important foundation for the sustainability of curriculum implementation in the next stages.

Input Evaluation

The input evaluation stage aims to assess the readiness of human resources, infrastructure, and internal school policies in supporting the effectiveness of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. This analysis emphasizes how school principals manage existing potential to ensure that all school components can

play an optimal role in realizing flexible, adaptive, and student-centered learning.



Figure 1. School Technology Facilities to Support the Learning Process

From the aspect of human resources, the teachers of Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School showed good ability in adapting the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum into learning practices. School principals actively facilitate teacher competency improvement through training activities, peer mentoring, and reflective forums. One of the tangible results of this support can be seen in the application of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in Deep Learning-based Arts and Culture learning. Through the macrame project, teachers develop collaborative learning across disciplines between art, mathematics, sociology, and economics. This learning not only produces works of art, but also instills the values of entrepreneurship, creativity, and social responsibility related to the DPL-8 dimension. Students are trained to work together, think critically, communicate, and write reflections through Padlet and Google Forms.

In terms of facilities and infrastructure, schools have adequate facility support to implement innovative technology-based learning. Computer labs, internet connections, and multimedia devices are used to support digital assessments such as Gimkit, Quizizz, and Google Classroom. The principal encourages the use of the school environment as a learning resource, including a garden area and an art space for project practice. Although there are still limitations in personal devices among students, schools overcome them with a policy of using laboratories on a rotational basis and group work that encourages collaboration and equitable distribution of learning opportunities.

In the input dimension, the principal shows a managerial-instructional leadership pattern that is operationalized through the policy of forming a curriculum team and teacher training. This mechanism has an impact on increasing teachers' ability to design project-based and digital learning. The school curriculum development team was formed to adapt national learning outcomes to the school's local context. The principal's policy focuses on strengthening digital literacy, implementing authentic assessments, and providing innovation space for teachers to write and develop teaching modules according to their interests. The decision-making pattern is participatory, where teachers are not just implementers, but also contributors to ideas in the formulation of learning policies.

Overall, the results of the input evaluation show that Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School has excellent readiness in terms of human resources, supporting facilities, and internal policies. The principal has succeeded in combining managerial, pedagogical, and collaborative roles to create a work environment that supports the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Although there are still challenges in the form of equitable distribution of digital facilities, the adaptive strategies and reflective culture that have grown in these schools provide a strong foundation for the implementation of an effective, innovative, and sustainable curriculum.

Process Evaluation

The process evaluation stage aims to assess how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is carried out at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School, as well as the extent to which the implementation of learning, supervision, and teacher assistance is running effectively as planned. This evaluation is focused on observing the suitability between the curriculum design and its implementation in the field, the quality of teaching and learning activities, the involvement of the principal in supervision, and the application of the Eight Dimensions of Graduate Profile (DPL-8) values in the educational process.

The results of the evaluation show that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School is quite effective, adaptive, and collaborative. The principal occupies a central position in ensuring that the entire learning process is in line with the spirit of independent learning. Through academic supervision activities, informal mentoring, and regular coordination meetings, the principal actively oversees teachers' teaching practices so that they remain based on the principles of differentiated learning, relevant to student needs, and oriented towards character development in accordance with DPL-8. This participatory leadership approach creates an open work atmosphere, where teachers feel empowered to experiment with innovative learning strategies.

The learning process that occurs in the classroom shows a real application of the principles of the Independent Curriculum. Based on the Deep Learning Teaching Module, teacher Adhitya Wisnuwardhana Mustika Putra applies the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) approach in the project themed "Macrame". The project integrates several disciplines that encourage students to think critically, creatively, and collaboratively. In its implementation, students work in small groups to research, design, and produce macrame works that have both aesthetic and functional value. This activity also fosters several dimensions of DPL such as creativity (DPL-4), collaboration (DPL-5), independence (DPL-6), and communication (DPL-8).

The learning process also runs in a fun and reflective atmosphere. Each meeting begins with ice breaking activities and spark discussions based on local cultural phenomena. The teacher then directs students to observe the form and function of the craft works around them, associating them with cultural values as well as local economic opportunities. This stage shows that learning is contextual,

grounded, and close to students' real lives. In carrying out assignments, teachers encourage students to use digital media such as Padlet, Google Classroom, and Gimkit to organize ideas, collaborate, and do self-reflection. This learning pattern shows that schools have transformed from traditional instructional models to participatory and digitally adaptive learning.

From the assessment aspect, teachers have implemented authentic assessment that is process-oriented. Evaluation is not only carried out on the final results of the project, but also on student involvement, responsibility, and cooperation during the activity. The use of peer assessment and self-reflection in the assessment of the Macrame project shows a shift in the evaluation paradigm: from simply measuring results to learning that fosters self-awareness and continuous competency improvement. This approach is in line with the principle of the Merdeka Curriculum that assessment should be part of the learning process itself, not just a tool to measure academic achievement.

Process findings suggest that principals implement reflective instructional leadership patterns, which work through collaborative academic supervision and ongoing feedback. This pattern encourages teachers to adopt project-based learning and authentic assessments. At the end of each month, a meeting is held to discuss the implementation of learning, obstacles, and follow-up plans. The principal not only reviews administrative documents such as teaching modules and teaching journals, but also conducts in-person classroom visits to see how the Merdeka Curriculum approach is applied in the field. From the results of these observations, the principal provided constructive feedback and encouraged teachers to continue to improve their learning practices.

In addition to the classroom, the application of DPL-8 values is also integrated in non-academic activities, such as the flagship program "Living Pharmacy Plants: PMR WIRA SMAN 1 Sambungmacan". This activity instills the dimensions of faith and piety (DPL-1), critical reasoning (DPL-3), and collaboration (DPL-5) through activities of caring for herbal plants and compiling reports on the benefits of traditional medicinal plants. By engaging a supervisor, students learn about social responsibility, environmental care, and teamwork. This program shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in schools does not only take place in the classroom, but also outside the classroom through contextual activities that strengthen students' character and independence.



Figure 2. Implementation of DPL-8 Values in Co-Curricular Activities

Thus, the results of the process evaluation show that Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum effectively through collaborative, contextual, and DPL-8-oriented learning. Principals have succeeded in creating a system of continuous supervision and reflection that supports teacher innovation, while teachers are able to translate curriculum principles into meaningful learning practices. Technical challenges such as device limitations and variations in digital capabilities are overcome with cooperation, rotation of means use, and a collaborative spirit. Overall, the process stage shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in this school has been carried out according to the goal: to form students who are characterful, adaptive, and ready to face change through living, reflective, and creative learning.

Product Evaluation

The results of the evaluation showed that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School resulted in real positive changes in the quality of learning and the character of students. Students show increased critical thinking skills, creativity, and independence in the learning process. Through the cross-disciplinary project Deep Learning Arts and Culture themed Macrame, students are able to produce crafts that not only have aesthetic value, but also economic and social value. This activity strengthens the dimensions of creativity (DPL-4), collaboration (DPL-5), independence (DPL-6), and communication (DPL-8) which are part of the Eight Dimensions of Graduate Profiles.

From the teacher's side, the implementation of this curriculum improves professionalism and pedagogical competence. Teachers are more open to learning innovations, utilizing digital media such as Padlet, Google Classroom, Quizizz, and Gimkit, and are able to design teaching modules that are contextual to the needs of students. A reflective culture grows through principal's supervision activities and teacher discussion forums, which strengthen the role of teachers as designers and implementers of the curriculum.

The principal has succeeded in building a collaborative and adaptive learning system. Through routine monitoring, mentoring, and periodic reflection, the principal ensures that learning activities not only pursue academic results, but also strengthen character according to DPL-8. The school environment has become more open, participatory, and oriented towards continuous quality improvement. The impact of implementation can also be seen from the flagship activity "Living Apothecary Plants: PMR WIRA SMAN 1 Sambungmacan", which fosters the dimensions of faith and piety (DPL-1), critical reasoning (DPL-3), and collaboration (DPL-5). This activity not only produces real products in the form of medicinal plant gardens, but also forms environmental awareness and social responsibility of students.

Products in the form of increased student motivation and collaborative culture are a consequence of the principal's leadership consistency in integrating

managerial, instructional, and transformational roles along the context, input, and process dimensions. Overall, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School produces educational products that reflect the goals of DPL-8: students with character, creativity, independence, and collaboration; professional and reflective teachers; and school principals play an active role as learning leaders who encourage innovation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the leadership of the principal at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School reflects a combination of transformational and instructional leadership, two models that are highly relevant in the context of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Within the framework of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994), the principal acts as an agent of change who instills a vision of independent learning, inspires teachers to innovate, and builds a collaborative work culture. This is reflected in the ability to encourage teachers to implement project-based learning, adapt teaching strategies to student characteristics, and strengthen cross-subject collaboration. This finding is in line with previous studies that highlight the importance of transformational leadership in fostering innovation and organizational change in educational settings (Aqodiah & Hasanah, 2024). However, unlike earlier research that tends to emphasize vision-building and motivation, this study demonstrates how transformational leadership is operationalized in the specific context of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in aligning school culture with student-centered learning principles.

On the other hand, the principal's leadership practice also demonstrates strong characteristics of instructional leadership as proposed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). The principal is actively involved in planning, supervising, and evaluating learning processes, as well as providing continuous professional support to teachers through mentoring and reflective practices. This is evident in the establishment of a school curriculum team, monitoring of DPL-8-based learning implementation, and encouragement for teachers to develop contextual teaching modules. These findings support previous research indicating that instructional leadership plays a crucial role in improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes (Solehah, Hakim, & Wathoni, 2024). Nevertheless, this study extends prior findings by showing that instructional leadership is not only limited to classroom supervision but also integrated with curriculum innovation efforts within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

The integration of transformational and instructional leadership explains the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation in this school. While the transformational aspect builds a shared vision and fosters a culture of innovation, the instructional aspect ensures the quality and consistency of implementation at the classroom level. This finding is consistent with studies on educational reform which emphasize that successful curriculum transformation requires both visionary

leadership and strong instructional guidance (Tasya, Alamsyah, & Pribadi, 2025). However, this study provides empirical insight into how these two leadership approaches are applied in practice, positioning the principal as a bridge between national policy and classroom implementation. The principal translates the Merdeka Curriculum into contextually relevant strategies that align with the needs of teachers and students, thereby supporting the implementation of curriculum transformation at the school level.

From a practical perspective, these findings provide important implications for school leaders and policymakers (Rif'an, 2025). For principals in other schools, this study suggests these findings suggest that effective curriculum implementation in this context requires not only the ability to inspire change but also the capacity to guide instructional practices in a structured manner. Principals can adopt a dual leadership approach by simultaneously fostering a shared vision of innovation and actively supporting teachers through supervision, mentoring, and collaborative learning practices (Jesus, 2024). For policymakers, the findings highlight the potential importance of designing professional development programs that integrate transformational and instructional leadership competencies, particularly in supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Marisa, 2021). In addition, policy support should focus on strengthening school capacity, providing adequate resources, and facilitating continuous professional learning for school leaders.

In terms of future research, this study opens several opportunities for further exploration. Future studies could examine the role of digital technologies in supporting principal leadership, particularly in enhancing supervision, communication, and data-driven decision-making in curriculum implementation. In addition, further research could investigate the long-term impact of principal leadership on student outcomes, including academic achievement, character development, and learning engagement within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. Comparative studies across different school contexts are also needed to understand how leadership practices vary and how contextual factors influence the effectiveness of curriculum transformation. By expanding the scope of analysis, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of educational leadership in the era of curriculum reform.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insight into how principal leadership supports the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Sambungmacan 1 Public Senior High School through the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) evaluation framework. The findings suggest that leadership practices in this context reflect a combination of managerial, instructional, transformational, and social roles. Using the CIPP model helps to organize how the principal contributes to school readiness (context), resource provision (input), the guidance of teaching and learning processes (process), and observable outcomes such as teacher practices and student

engagement (product). Rather than generalizing beyond the case, this study offers a structured way to understand how leadership is enacted and evaluated within a specific school setting. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that principals may benefit from balancing vision-building efforts with ongoing instructional support, including mentoring teachers, facilitating collaboration, and managing available resources effectively. Strengthening communication and partnerships with stakeholders also appears to support the implementation process in this context. For policymakers, these results may inform the design of leadership development initiatives that emphasize integrated competencies aligned with curriculum implementation needs, while remaining adaptable to local conditions.

For future research, studies in different school contexts are needed to examine how these patterns of leadership vary and to what extent they relate to different implementation outcomes. Further work could also explore the role of digital tools in supporting supervision and collaboration, as well as examine more closely the relationship between leadership practices and specific student learning outcomes within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

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