



## **Transformative Leadership in Education: Principal Leadership Styles and the Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at School**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines how school principals' leadership styles on the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar program at MAN 1 Lombok. In an evolving educational landscape, transformational leadership is identified as a critical factor in facilitating positive and innovative changes in teaching and learning processes. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research utilized in-depth interviews and direct observations involving principals, teachers, and students. The research findings reveal that transformational leadership significantly influences the creation of a supportive learning environment that fosters student autonomy and creativity. Key determinants identified include effective communication, ongoing professional development for educators, and robust support for student initiatives. Despite these strengths, the study identifies notable challenges in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar, such as resistance to change and constraints related to resource availability. Consequently, this research underscores the necessity for leadership training for principals and advocates for enhanced collaboration among all educational stakeholders to ensure the program's successful execution. By elucidating the relationship between leadership styles and classroom practices, this study aims to offer actionable insights to inform the development of more effective educational policies in Indonesia.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Education, one of the most important sectors, must run evenly to support national development (Agus et al., 2021). Moving in line with its goals of developing human resources based on Science, Technology, and Art and labor-based (High Skill and High Wage) (Muslihati et al., 2023; Tok et al., 2022).

Education in the RPJPN direction mentions three main focuses: internal integration, external integration, and merging between leadership and faculties (students) (Juharyanto et al., 2023; Prasetyo et al., 2023).

The change processes and patterns must thoroughly and extensively inspect responsibilities. It becomes the inherent and indispensable responsibility of the diligent and dedicated staff members, who must fully embrace and wholeheartedly execute the implementation of active involvement in a dynamic and fluid system, expertly handling the multifaceted aspects of leadership and education with utmost proficiency and unwavering commitment (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Prasetyo et al., 2022).

Currently, the country strives for a higher education system that creates assertive, critical, innovative, aesthetic, and even caring self-esteem. This is in line with the General Curriculum of Higher Education (GBPTNI), which depicts the form of an education system focused on student independence and critical thinking, adopting the concept of Merdeka Belajar (Arifin, 2020; Belia et al., 2023).

The downstream level of education, in conjunction with the higher institutions, must align its regulatory base and basis for education with its plan elements and follow the above direction, all to ensure that the country's leadership role can effectively respond and act promptly in addressing the needs and challenges of the education system (Gunawan et al., 2023; Purwanti, 2021).

Whatever the proposed merits are presented to the nation's education and reflect on its environmental ecosystem, it functions to be productive and takes the same moral obligations in building national children (Shaturaev, 2021). Education shapes the future generation into responsible and conscientious individuals by instilling the values of empathy, compassion, and integrity (Fadhli et al., 2023). Moreover, it is crucial in fostering a deep understanding of our natural surroundings and the urgent need for sustainable practices (Belinski et al., 2020). Consequently, by ensuring that children receive a well-rounded education encompassing academic knowledge and ethical principles, we are equipping them with the tools necessary to become active contributors to society and custodians of the environment (Hancock & Nuttman, 2014). Through education, we pave the way for a brighter, more sustainable future for our nation and the world (Ni'mah et al., 2023).

Government regulations that strive to measure adult learning for today's education leaders are becoming increasingly broader and easier to expose. In this research, the researcher focused on the scope of research analysis, more widely on the leadership strategy in a LOTK whose implications.

The educational leadership implementation at MAN 1 Lombok in the educational environment points out the teaching and learning process in the classroom so that qualified students are required. This is the main indicator in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. For this reason, the implementation of the teaching and learning process in the classroom is planned effectively with the condition of each teacher who has implemented their own teaching and learning process in the classroom (Marlina & Avcl, 2024). Also, always do their evaluation in the form of formative assessments and at the final level of learning. School leadership is an important indicator for teachers in preparing learning assessment instruments as indicators of student independence in setting MBKM standards (Komariah et al., 2024).

This study examines leadership styles in the world of education. The results of this study are expected to be used as input and reference for schools, particularly MAN 1 Lombok or other schools, in terms of educational leadership styles that can shape the learning process. Students should be able to adapt to new environments, acquire greater knowledge, and become devout and steadfast in faith. They should also have noble character and master the field of science and technology, making them competitive in the world of work. Empirical research is indispensable in providing real proof, accuracy, and reliability. Therefore, this research was conducted to address the problem of "What is the educational leadership style in implementing freedom of learning (Merdeka Belajar) at MAN 1 Lombok?"

The world of leadership, especially in education, also changes over time. Adopting a transformational leadership style is expected to reduce the severity of the condition and have a positive impact on the situation and condition in the future. Therefore, an effective educational leadership style is needed. Additionally, the policy of allowing students to have freedom in learning is an important aspect of every educational institution. Teachers, as educators, are influenced by their attitudes when implementing this Merdeka Belajar system, which may have an impact on administration and sharia. The phenomenon, this study was conducted to identify leadership styles in education. The results of

this study are expected to be used as input by schools, especially MAN 1 Lombok, or other schools. It is important to ensure that the leadership style aligns with the theoretical teachings.

## **METHODS**

This study used an analytical descriptive design. A mix method approach was used for a more detailed analysis of participant. Intensive analysis was necessary for a deeper understanding of the phenomena. This research utilized a qualitative descriptive approach. In collecting the data, the research subjects employed a snowball-sampling technique. The techniques for data collection were observation, interview, and documentation. They employed a comparative approach. Then data were analyzed using (1) Data reduction, (2) data criteria and verification, (3) presentation of data, and (4) conclusion. The educational leadership style was identified by in-depth interviews with selected informants to better understand their experiences (Cresswell, 2012).

Qualitative research used a descriptive approach. Data of this research were taken from three informants. Furthermore, the informants were the teachers who are currently serving as Vice Principals for Academic Affairs, Vice Principals for Student Affairs, Vice Principals for General Affairs, and Curriculum Teachers. The data source is data that is related to the educational leadership style of the school principal in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. Data collection techniques used interviews, questionnaires, and document studies. Data collection in this study used observation, questionnaires, and interviews. The sampling used in this study is random sampling with a sample of 37 teachers. Data analysis techniques used in this study are qualitative and quantitative. Data analysis tools used in this study are the Likert scale and descriptive statistics (Bungin, 2019) (Sugiyono, 2019).

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Educational leadership has a close relationship to the success of educational institutions in carrying out their main tasks and functions. Gunarhadi (2016) implies that the role of school leaders in leading dynamic change and reform within the micro-cultural school will then be able to direct the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar policy (Roqib et al., 2021). Leadership emphasizes an intellectual leader based on a strong academic background and the ability to conceptualize and develop a strong learning

organization. Strong approaches characterize contemporary educational leadership whether focusing on educational leaders as learning, emotional, professional, and system leaders, and where accountability and performance are ever-present (Kurnia & Prasetyo, 2024).

The implementation of leadership in educational leadership also shows many situations and the conditions of MAN 1 Lombok, which often cause doubts about the planning to be carried out. MAN 1 Lombok also faces an issue as a final activity in Senior High School, that in the voting process in the classroom or the living room from the other reports received and printed in the national press provide results which are still lacking in the 2014-2017 school year, namely the low rank of teachers' competence in implementing their learning objectives creates an argument for writing the implementation of leadership style in Merdeka Belajar leadership. With the problems or facts that are found in the leadership characteristics of educational leaders in implementing the right Merdeka Belajar, a study will be made to identify the leadership style (Martoyo & Amara, 2024).

Implementation of the questionnaire is divided into three components of the educational leadership style. On the first day, the score is 72.31% for the study field with a full managerial leadership style. The implementation of independent learning scores 77.56% and transformational leadership style. Implementation of the independence field of non-formal education with a score of 71.18% the autonomy field with a score of 66.43% and the global competitiveness field score of 73.53% all use a full managerial leadership style. Implementation of the second-day questionnaire field with a teacher average of 71% using a combination of full managerial and transformational leadership styles. In implementing the Merdeka Belajar program, the Principal uses a transformational leadership style. In implementing independent learning, the principal uses a full managerial leadership style

Merdeka Belajar is implemented to be the trigger behind comprehensive and fundamental change. The head of the MAN 1 Lombok was proactive, and always responded to educational changes at the level of regulations and educational policies issued by the central government and the Minister of Education and Culture. MAN 1 Lombok, through the results of long-term coaching, is judged to have leaders who are active in creating a strong organizational culture, who are serving, support, and responding to the

aspirations of their members, and organizational change is driven by the shared values and vision of its members. MAN 1 Lombok, through the results of long-term coaching, is said to have leadership capable of motivating change, to be able to empower and integrate into one system of all management, head of school, and all teachers, employees, students, and all parties involved, initiating an evaluation of the school's commitment to scientific research, especially the functions of the educational leadership of MAN 1 Lombok.

### **Concepts of Educational Leadership Styles**

Educational management practitioners state that education leadership has different perspectives and frameworks, with interchangeable behaviour depending on the situation. Each expert has different schools of thought in discussing leadership styles. Leadership style is a framework for handling situations, decision-making, guiding and motivating groups, and practicing control and delegation of authority (Supriadi et al., 2021). The success of a learning organization is influenced by educational leaders, internalization of vision, mission values, and resource allocation strategies. Educational leaders need to improve human resources in schools to meet global demands in education (Muadin, 2022). Leadership styles vary, with some focused-on educational leadership, management, etc. Each leader has a personal style, and leadership aims to influence group activities. Different leadership styles have been correlated with teaching, learning, and improved school performance. The five styles are autocratic, participative, and other-oriented, participative egalitarian, laissez-faire, or permissive, and philosophical leader (Prasetyo, 2018). Determining the appropriate leadership philosophy requires ethical judgment. The liberal individual-oriented style emphasizes relationships and internal processes.

The Merdeka Belajar policy is a reform in the vocational field that aims to prepare physically healthy, intelligent, skilled, noble-minded, and work-ready students. It aims to improve vocational graduation rates, increase productive workers, boost the regional economy, and enhance education in the digital era. The 4.0 Industrial Revolution emphasizes connectivity between humans and machines.

Education reform is accompanied by changes in leadership roles and responsibilities. The Minister of Education and Culture of Indonesia supports the idea that managing is part of reform. Leaders are required to initiate and

implement transformative change. Millennial Education Leaders do not follow the LDDK, but rather the 2009 Law on Teachers. This approach shows that school leaders still have transactional leadership. Education leaders and administrators should come from school principals. The Merdeka Belajar policy in the era of Industrial Revolution 5.0 needs to be studied. This is the background of research at MAN 1 Lombok, managing the Merdeka Belajar program.

Successful schools and madrasas showed that effective leadership plans objectives develop strategies and utilize resources to achieve desired outcomes. Wiersema's studies on principal leadership theories suggested that academically focused leadership tends to be transformative. Effective educational leadership depends on leader qualities, institutional quality, and social environment.

Educational leaders, like principals, must have leadership style and initiative to inspire subordinates. Efendi et al. (2020) found that leadership style affects work motivation. Leadership style reflects four dimensions of dynamic leadership. This creates unity and warmth among kindergartens. Democratic education is Merdeka Belajar.

### **Overview of MAN 1 Lombok's Educational Leadership Style**

Merdeka Belajar is a new and contemporary policy that aims to bring a paradigm of freedom to students' disposal. Each school is mandated to start implementing this policy at the beginning of the 2020/2021 school year, including MAN 1 Lombok. This study aims to identify and analyze authoritative, democratic, and liberal educational leadership styles found in MAN 1 Lombok in implementing Merdeka Belajar. Bolton et al.'s educational leadership style indicator is used to identify and analyze educational leadership. Data was collected by doing participant observations. The results showed that the pattern of implementing a school-based curriculum was democratic. In contrast, the principal did not show the pattern of educational leadership in implementing Merdeka Belajar at MAN 1 Lombok.

To implement the curriculum, MAN 1 Lombok implemented a policy on school culture that fully entrusts the implementation of the learning process to teachers. The principal's leadership has manifested in the form of more pragmatic-situational policies. Policies that give a sacred space and supporting

trust to be part of the behavior of wise teachers. When making organizational policies, the principal aspects of the policy are highly exploitative of the psychological space of individuals. Subject-centered, instrumental influence, no justice, no distribution of roles, conservatism, depriving the principal of a teacher to realize into a moral human being for self and society from the control of external regulations. It is exploitative leadership. Justice-centered, conservatively oriented, and spirit-centered leaders who believe in democratic coordination.

Based on the processed data, it is obtained that the educational leadership style in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar is transformational, transactional, inverse, and stagnant. There is an absence of a leadership style among all educational leaders, where leaders still apply a transactional and transformational leadership style. The obstacle in implementing Merdeka Belajar at MAN 1 Lombok has filled the data the principal requires. The data collected shows that parents with a median percentage of 93.33 were chosen as the best education or leadership assessor at MAN 1 Lombok more than 90% - 100%. So that the application of the educational leadership style at MAN 1 Lombok becomes principal, get principal education and its application of vice principal, head of majors or subject officers, and teachers still work harder.

### **Alignment of Leadership Style with Merdeka Belajar (Challenges and Success Factors)**

The educational leadership style at MAN 1 Lombok is more transformational than traditional, with a personal background influence. It supports democratic learning independence and the principles of Merdeka Belajar. The leadership style aligns with policy and the objectives of the Independent Study, promoting democratic leadership and value-based transformational actions. MAN 1 Lombok's leadership is oriented towards independent learning and a friendly style of development, influenced by Indonesian values.

Educational leadership at MAN 1 Lombok began to be implemented in managing the national education system in the form of the Merdeka Belajar (freedom to study) framework. There are several obstacles to and success factors for the implementation of educational leadership, including instructional leadership, in the success of the educational system, especially leadership in the spread of the pandemic from COVID-19 in Indonesia. This included

effectiveness, uncertainty in the school budget next year, students' dropout during the implementation of Merdeka Belajar (freedom to study) because the parents could not afford to pay school fees, and the assumption that a global teacher is the cause of sextortion. In Indonesia, an educational problem can be influenced by weak policies and regulations in implementing the national education system. The existence of capacity in the government can mitigate global threats. The relevance between the process of determining education policy and the problems facing education, especially in the implementation of the educational leadership style, does not yet attract the world of communication science.

In the study, it was found that interpersonal communication carried out well, the descriptive style of educational leadership, the performative style of educational leadership, the situational style of educational leadership in implementing Merdeka Belajar (freedom to study), and the enthusiasm of teachers and students in the learning process. Educators or teachers, as the front line in empowering students, are also aware of the challenges of education. However, the personality approach conducted by educators to empower students, with S. Boeyan, has been successfully implementing character seeding in empowering students to care, be simple, and be disciplined for thirty years. Besides, there is support and effective empowerment with the six pillars of character to initiate responsible leaders through the educational leadership style at MAN 1 Lombok, with the support for and effective. In this research, students use all types of characters in problem-solving. Thus, the quality of education must make responsible personalities to reshape the nation's character.

Education implementation with the Merdeka Belajar system also requires a direct change in the system contained in educational leadership. Therefore, the determination of the leadership style is urgently needed for leaders currently so that they can make the right decisions in developing schools in the future and for the younger generation.

The research findings contribute to education and highlight the importance of Merdeka Belajar in MAN 1 Lombok. The results are valuable to practitioners, particularly principals implementing the Merdeka Belajar policy. Knowing the principal's leadership style can change educators' and students' learning approaches, emphasizing student activity and teacher facilitation. The principal's strategy involves ensuring teacher commitment to creating lesson

plans.

The analysis found that leadership styles at MAN 1 Lombok can be divided into seven main styles. These styles were identified based on the analysis of interviews and observations with school principals, principals and teachers who act as curriculum leaders, principals and teachers who act as instructional leaders, educators who act as supervisors, experts or resource leaders, principals, and educators as leaders who create relationships, principals and educators as change leaders, and anyone else who acts as leaders to keep in mind.

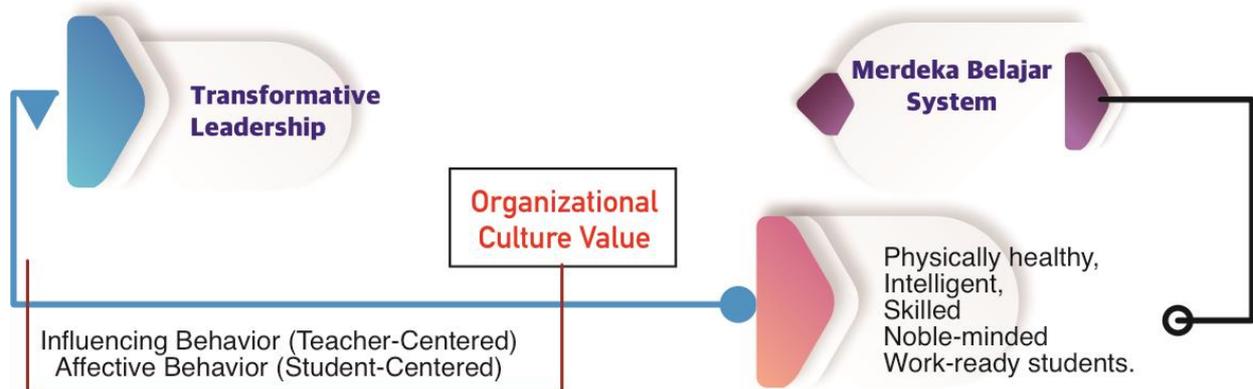
MAN 1 Lombok uses an educational leadership style based on survey results, including administrative and transformational styles. Challenges include internal factors like principal leadership and teacher motivation. However, success is achieved through teachers' intention to apply the leadership style and make the Merdeka Belajar implementation engaging for students. The results showed that MAN 1 Lombok practices a transformational leadership style in education, with a clear vision and mission, long-term goals, and readiness for curriculum changes. MAN 1 Lombok has a long-term operational system and supports visionary leadership. Survey results indicate continuity in vision development. The implementation of free learning is based on inspiring students, scheduling non-class learning activities, and fostering perseverance. The findings show readiness at both the student and teacher levels.

The headmaster of MAN 1 Lombok, as the leader of an educational institution, must adopt educational leadership and the implementation of free learning. This needs to be done in conjunction with schools' primary and basic functions, namely implementing learning based on love, respect for existence, intelligence (faith), insight, talent/potential, professionalizing educators, and humane character with a hallmark of educating, not just teaching.

Educational leadership is a style of leadership shown by a principal to create an educational unit blessed by Allah SWT and the environment, which is due to 21st-century skills. The educational leadership style demonstrated by the principal is the essence of leadership shown in the practical implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Learn project.

This study identifies the relevant Islamic educational leadership style of MAN 1. It aligns with the World Class University principle by addressing global issues and providing insights into the ecological institution. The results

contribute to the theory of leadership by introducing the vision of Islamic leaders. Future research should consider widening the scope.



**Figure 1: The Relationship Transformative Leadership among Merdeka Belajar System**

Figure 1 describes the model articulates the integral relationship between transformative leadership, organizational culture, and educational system goals within the context of educational management. Transformative leadership is positioned as a critical catalyst influencing both teacher-centered behavior and student-centered affective behavior, thus shaping the overall learning environment. This leadership style promotes a shared vision, inspires change, and motivates stakeholders towards a cohesive organizational purpose.

Central to the model is the concept of organizational culture value, which serves as a mediating force linking leadership behaviors to the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar System. This system aims to cultivate students who are physically healthy, intellectually capable, skilled, noble-minded, and prepared for workforce demands. Effective educational management thus requires leaders to foster an organizational culture that supports both professional growth among teachers and holistic development for students. By aligning leadership practices with cultural values and systemic educational goals, managers can drive sustainable improvements in learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness.

## CONSLUSION

Educational leadership involves leadership and education. These components contribute to various definitions of academic leadership. The

principal's behavior in influencing behavior (Teacher-Centered) or affective behavior (Student-Centered), educational leadership style at MAN 1 Lombok implemented in the Merdeka Belajar program. The leadership style of educational leadership at MAN 1 Lombok as many as two leadership styles are participative leadership style or democratic leadership and transactional leadership or management style leadership. The main characteristics of the educational leadership style are that it consists of characteristics, functions, and behaviors that are educative, liberal, centrist, and individualistic. These findings require reflection, both on a philosophical and social level. On a philosophical level, this reflects a continuing debate regarding the essence and purposes of educational leadership. Furthermore, these findings of educational leadership style can be integrated with learning. Leadership style is a silent language that recognizes the personal preferences of the staff and their need to contribute to success actively.

Educational leadership focuses on educative attitudes and behaviour Centered on characters internalized in free learning. Critics argue it places more emphasis on formal values, reducing the role of educational leaders to facilitators. Educators become role testers. The implementation of learning involves using solutions that enable students to prioritize their real-life problems. Understanding the students will reveal the need to change the style of educational leadership.

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