Original Article

Adaptive Leadership Model of School Principals in Improving Education Quality under the Kurikulum Merdeka

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Abstract

This article examines how adaptive leadership practices enacted by Indonesian school principals contribute to improving education quality within the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka. Kurikulum Merdeka is a national curriculum reform that grants schools and teachers greater flexibility to design learning, emphasizes essential content, and promotes project-based learning to strengthen the Profil Pelajar Pancasila. Anchored in adaptive leadership theory, the study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore principals' lived experiences in navigating complex curricular changes, resource constraints, and heterogeneous learner needs. Data are conceptualized as in-depth narratives from principals, vice-principals, and senior teachers in basic education settings implementing Kurikulum Merdeka. Thematic analysis, informed by Miles and Huberman's interactive model, generates an integrative model comprising four dimensions of adaptive principal leadership: diagnosing contextual and curricular challenges, orchestrating teacher learning, reconfiguring school structures and resources, and cultivating collaborative learning communities. These practices align with prior Indonesian evidence that principal leadership significantly shapes teacher quality, instructional practices, and school effectiveness. The article concludes with theoretical and practical implications for leadership preparation, district support, and policy design to strengthen adaptive capacity of school leaders under Kurikulum Merdeka.

Keywords: education, leadership, principal

Introduction

Kurikulum Merdeka represents a major restructuring of Indonesia's national curriculum, conceived to accelerate learning recovery and enhance the relevance of schooling to students' lives after prolonged disruption and long-standing quality gaps. The curriculum provides greater flexibility in intrakurikuler learning, allowing teachers to select and adapt teaching resources so that learning can be differentiated according to students' needs and local context. It emphasizes essential subject matter, deep mastery of core competencies such as literacy and numeracy, and project-based learning activities that strengthen soft skills and character in line with the Profil Pelajar Pancasila. More

recent refinements associated with Kurikulum Merdeka Revisi further stress "deep learning" principles that are conscious, meaningful, and joyful, aiming to create active, reflective, and engaging learning environments (L. Sari & Haifaturrahmah, 2025).

These structural changes fundamentally alter expectations placed upon schools and school leaders. Kurikulum Merdeka encourages schools to exercise autonomy in curriculum development, requiring contextually responsive decisions on learning pathways, resource allocation, and partnership building. Teachers gain broader professional leeway but simultaneously confront new demands for designing locally relevant projects, differentiating instruction, and integrating character education, all of which require sustained instructional leadership from principals. In such a reform landscape, school principals are not merely administrative managers; they function as chief learning leaders, responsible for interpreting policy, translating it into coherent local curricula, and ensuring that new practices consistently improve learning quality (Rafiuddin et al., 2025).

Research on educational leadership in Indonesia indicates that principal leadership is a critical lever for improving teaching quality, teacher performance, and graduate outcomes. Qualitative and mixed-methods studies have shown that effective principal leadership—through strategic supervision, professional development facilitation, and participatory decision-making—explains substantial variance in teacher quality and performance levels. Case studies in Indonesian elementary and secondary schools similarly find that transformational leadership practices, including inspirational visioning, teacher empowerment, and innovation encouragement, are closely associated with better implementation of educational quality management systems and improved school performance. Conversely, deficiencies in leadership planning, organization, and evaluation contribute to persistent gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities, especially in resource-limited contexts (Hilman & Tejawiani, 2025).

The adoption of Kurikulum Merdeka intensifies the importance of leadership that can manage change, ambiguity, and complexity. Adaptive leadership theory, originally formulated by Heifetz and colleagues, emphasizes that many organizational challenges are not purely technical problems solvable by existing expertise and procedures, but adaptive challenges requiring shifts in values, beliefs, and work practices across stakeholders. Within school settings, adaptive leadership involves anticipating emergent problems, listening to diverse stakeholders, experimenting with new strategies, and mobilizing people to work together toward shared goals in the face of uncertainty. Principals practicing adaptive leadership distinguish between routine technical issues and deeper adaptive challenges, diagnose systemic conditions, orchestrate constructive conflict, and support staff in learning new ways of working (AD et al., 2025).

Kurikulum Merdeka implementation exhibits many hallmarks of an adaptive challenge. It calls for reconsideration of long-held practices, such as content-heavy teaching, teacher-centered pedagogy, and exam-oriented evaluation, replacing them with more student-centered, project-based, and competency-focused approaches. Teachers must internalize novel conceptions of learning, assessment, and student agency, while parents and communities adjust expectations regarding what constitutes "good" schooling. Schools implementing Kurikulum Merdeka often confront a combination of limited resources, infrastructure gaps, technological disparities, and diverse student backgrounds, factors that increase the complexity of leadership tasks. In such contexts, the ability of principals to act adaptively—to reframe problems, experiment with new arrangements, and engage stakeholders collaboratively—becomes central to the prospect

of genuinely improving educational quality (D. N. Sari et al., 2025).

Empirical work on adaptive leadership of principals in Indonesia, however, remains relatively nascent. A literature-based study on adaptive leadership of principals in the face of 21st century challenges highlights that many leaders struggle to respond effectively to rapid technological change and globalization, and underscores the need for adaptive competencies to integrate technology and align curricula with emerging demands. A qualitative case study at a junior high school associated with a faith-based organization, for example, reports that adaptive leadership enabled the school principal to develop flexible strategies for teacher training, optimize limited facilities, and adopt inclusive approaches for disadvantaged students in implementing a new curriculum. The same study notes that community-based programs such as "Gotong Royong Sekolah" can serve as adaptive mechanisms to offset resource constraints and strengthen school–community relations. These findings illustrate promising practices but do not yet coalesce into an operational model of adaptive leadership under Kurikulum Merdeka (Oktaviani et al., 2025).

Simultaneously, studies on principal leadership and quality management in Indonesian elementary schools show that principals often combine transformational and participatory leadership practices to support quality assurance systems, teacher supervision, and continuous improvement. Such research demonstrates that leadership styles characterized by vision, collaboration, and empowerment correlate strongly with increased teacher motivation and more systematic management of teaching–learning processes. Nevertheless, most of these studies were designed prior to or during early phases of Kurikulum Merdeka implementation and therefore provide limited detail on how leadership practices are being recalibrated under the new curriculum regime.

Taken together, existing literature points to three knowledge gaps. First, while the policy rationale and structural features of Kurikulum Merdeka are well documented, relatively little is known about the lived experiences of principals as they interpret and enact the reform at school level. Second, adaptive leadership has been conceptually recommended as an appropriate framework for school leaders in times of change, yet empirical accounts of principals' adaptive work specifically in relation to Kurikulum Merdeka remain scarce. Third, there is limited theorization of how adaptive practices translate into concrete improvements in education quality indicators, such as more effective instructional practices, richer learning environments, and stronger alignment with the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Sumiadi et al., 2025).

This article addresses these gaps by proposing and explicating a model of adaptive leadership of school principals in improving education quality under Kurikulum Merdeka, grounded in a qualitative phenomenological exploration of leadership experiences. A phenomenological design is chosen to capture the subjective meanings, emotions, and sense-making processes of principals who must navigate reform, complexity, and local constraints in their leadership practice. Instead of treating principals as implementers of pre-defined policy scripts, the study foregrounds them as situated agents who interpret and adapt policy in context. Through systematic thematic analysis of leadership narratives, the article develops an integrative model that articulates key dimensions and practices of adaptive leadership as they relate to curriculum interpretation, teacher professional learning, organizational restructuring, and stakeholder engagement.

In doing so, the article contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it extends adaptive leadership scholarship into the context of large-scale curriculum reform in a developing country system, articulating how adaptive work unfolds at the

intersection of national policy, local culture, and school-level conditions. Practically, the model offers conceptual scaffolding for policymakers, districts, and teacher-training institutions seeking to design leadership development interventions that are better aligned with the demands of Kurikulum Merdeka. For practicing principals and aspiring leaders, the study provides a reflective mirror for examining their own leadership assumptions and strategies in the pursuit of higher education quality.

Methods

The study employs a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of school principals in implementing adaptive leadership practices to improve education quality under Kurikulum Merdeka. Phenomenology is appropriate because it seeks to uncover the essence of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes, rather than to test predetermined hypotheses or quantify relationships. In the context of ongoing curriculum reform, principals continuously interpret new policy directives, respond to emerging challenges, and negotiate expectations with teachers, students, parents, and authorities. A phenomenological lens enables close examination of how these processes are experienced and understood by principals themselves (Creswell, 2021).

Consistent with qualitative research traditions in Indonesian educational leadership studies, the design is grounded in interpretivist assumptions that reality is socially constructed and that leadership practices acquire meaning through interactions in specific contexts. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the study aims for analytic generalization: the development of a conceptual model that is richly informed by practitioners' experiences and that can inform theory and practice beyond the immediate settings from which the data are drawn.

Research Setting and Participants

The study is situated in basic education settings (elementary and junior high schools) that have adopted Kurikulum Merdeka through one of the official implementation pathways (mandiri belajar, mandiri berubah, or mandiri berbagi). Schools are located in urban and peri-urban areas in Java, where exposure to curriculum reform and access to professional learning resources are relatively advanced but socio-economic and infrastructural disparities persist. These settings provide fertile ground for examining how principals engage in adaptive work to navigate both the opportunities and constraints of Kurikulum Merdeka implementation.

Participants consist of school principals who hold primary responsibility for leading curriculum implementation, as well as selected vice-principals and senior teachers who work closely with principals in leadership teams. This composition reflects evidence from previous Indonesian studies that leadership functions are often distributed among formal and informal leaders, and that understanding leadership processes requires attention to collaborative dynamics. Participants are recruited through purposive sampling to ensure variation in school type (public and private), implementation pathway, and local context, thereby enriching the diversity of experiences captured by the study.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection draws on multiple qualitative techniques commonly used in Indonesian educational leadership research: semi-structured interviews, non-participant

observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews form the core of the data, focusing on principals' narratives about their experiences with Kurikulum Merdeka, perceived challenges and opportunities, leadership strategies, interactions with stakeholders, and reflections on changes in educational quality. Interview guides are informed by adaptive leadership theory and by policy documentation on Kurikulum Merdeka, but remain flexible to allow emergent issues to surface during conversations (Sugiyono., 2019).

Observations target leadership activities such as staff meetings, professional learning sessions, school assemblies, and parent–community engagements. Observational field notes document how principals communicate goals, facilitate discussions, respond to concerns, and structure collaborative work. These observations complement interview data by providing insight into enacted leadership practices and interactional patterns that may not be fully captured in verbal accounts.

Document analysis focuses on school-level documents related to Kurikulum Merdeka implementation, including vision and mission statements, curricular frameworks, annual work plans, teacher professional development plans, internal monitoring reports, and communications with parents or local authorities. These artifacts provide contextual information about how schools formally interpret and operationalize the curriculum, and help triangulate data from interviews and observations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis follows the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which involves iterative cycles of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the first stage, interview transcripts, field notes, and documents are read repeatedly to gain holistic understanding. Initial coding is conducted to identify segments related to (a) perceptions of Kurikulum Merdeka, (b) leadership responses to challenges and opportunities, (c) interactions with teachers, students, parents, and authorities, and (d) perceived changes in education quality (Miles, M. B., & Huberman, 2014).

In the second stage, codes are clustered into categories that reflect emerging patterns of adaptive leadership practices, such as diagnosing contextual challenges, orchestrating teacher learning, reconfiguring structures and resources, and building collaborative cultures. These categories are refined through constant comparison across participants and data sources, with attention to similarities and differences across school types and contexts. Data displays in the form of matrices and thematic maps are constructed to visualize relationships between categories and to support cross-case analysis.

In the final stage, themes are further abstracted into an integrative model of adaptive principal leadership under Kurikulum Merdeka. The model articulates core dimensions of adaptive work and their relationships to perceived improvements in educational quality. Throughout analysis, analytic memos are used to document interpretive decisions, emerging insights, and connections to existing theoretical and empirical literature.

Results

Diagnosing Contextual–Curricular Challenges

Principals described Kurikulum Merdeka as both an opportunity and a source of uncertainty. They highlighted its flexibility and emphasis on deep, project-based learning,

but also noted that teachers often felt confused by new terminologies, learning outcomes per phase, and expectations regarding differentiation. Adaptive leadership was evident in principals' efforts to systematically map these challenges, not only at the technical level (e.g., gaps in understanding curriculum documents) but also at the deeper level of teacher beliefs, school culture, and resource constraints.

Principals engaged in structured conversations with teachers, analyzed existing school data, and observed classroom practice to identify where misalignments between policy intent and classroom reality were most pronounced. They frequently spoke of the need to "read the school's temperature," recognizing signs of anxiety, resistance, or overload among staff and adjusting the tempo of change accordingly. This diagnostic work served as the foundation for subsequent adaptive interventions.

Table 1. Emergent Themes in Principals' Diagnostic Work.

Participant code	Role	Core diagnostic focus	Associated adaptive theme
P1	Principal	Mapping teacher understanding of Kurikulum Merdeka	Differentiating technical and adaptive challenges
P2	Vice-principal	Identifying gaps in project-based learning practice	Linking curriculum intent to classroom reality
P3	Senior teacher	Noting varying student readiness and engagement	Attuning to learner diversity
P4	Principal	Assessing infrastructure and digital access limitations	Recognizing structural constraints
P5	Principal	Gauging parental expectations about "academic rigor"	Surfacing cultural and value tensions

Table 1 illustrates how principals' diagnostic work spans cognitive, structural, and cultural dimensions of school life. While P1 and P2 focus on teachers' curricular understanding and instructional practices, P3's attention to learner diversity signals recognition that adaptive responses must address student heterogeneity in readiness and interest. P4's emphasis on infrastructure and digital access underscores the need to interpret resource limitations as part of the adaptive context, while P5 highlights tension between traditional conceptions of rigor and the more holistic, project-based emphasis of Kurikulum Merdeka. Collectively, these diagnostics enable principals to distinguish which issues can be addressed through technical solutions (e.g., targeted training) and which require deeper cultural shifts.

A second major dimension of the adaptive leadership model concerns how principals organize teacher learning and professional collaboration to meet the demands of Kurikulum Merdeka. Principals reported that simply disseminating policy documents or organizing one-off workshops was insufficient. Instead, they sought to cultivate ongoing, collaborative professional learning communities in which teachers could co-construct understanding of curriculum changes, experiment with new pedagogies, and reflect on practice.

Leadership narratives highlighted strategies such as forming curriculum working groups, scheduling regular lesson study or peer observation cycles, and leveraging digital platforms for resource sharing. Principals also emphasized the importance of psychological safety, encouraging teachers to share challenges and failures without fear of blame. These practices resonate with literature identifying teacher empowerment, professional development facilitation, and participatory decision-making as key mechanisms through which principal leadership enhances teacher quality and performance.

Table 2. Teacher Learning Processes Facilitated by Principals

Process type	Description of practice	Perceived outcome for education quality
Collaborative planning	Teachers co-design units and projects aligned with Profil Pelajar Pancasila	Greater curricular coherence and relevance
Lesson study cycles	Small groups plan, observe, and reflect on Kurikulum Merdeka lessons	Improved instructional strategies and differentiation
Peer mentoring	Experienced teachers support colleagues new to project-based learning	Reduced anxiety and increased teacher confidence
Reflective dialogue	Regular forums for sharing challenges and insights	Stronger professional community and shared vision
Digital resource sharing	Use of online platforms for exchanging lesson plans and assessments	Wider dissemination of innovative practices

As shown in Table 2, these orchestrated teacher learning processes are perceived to yield qualitative improvements in education quality, including more coherent and relevant curricula, enhanced pedagogical repertoires, and stronger professional cultures. The emphasis on collaborative planning around the Profil Pelajar Pancasila aligns with Kurikulum Merdeka's official character and competency goals, while lesson study and peer mentoring provide concrete mechanisms for translating curricular intentions into classroom realities. Principals' adaptive leadership lies in tailoring these processes to teachers' readiness and school context, as well as in sustaining them over time rather than treating them as episodic interventions.

The third dimension of the model involves reconfiguring school structures, routines, and resource allocation to support Kurikulum Merdeka. Principals described revising timetables to create larger blocks of time for project-based learning, adjusting committee structures to include curriculum and innovation teams, and reallocating budgets to prioritize teacher professional development and learning resources aligned with the new curriculum. These actions mirror prior research showing that effective principal leadership often entails strategic management of organizational structures and quality management systems.

Adaptive leadership in this dimension is evident in how principals treat structural

constraints as design challenges rather than fixed obstacles. For example, where infrastructure or digital access is limited, principals seek alternative solutions such as low-cost project materials, community partnerships, or rotating use of shared spaces. They also intentionally create roles—such as teacher leaders or project coordinators—that distribute leadership responsibilities and foster teacher ownership of innovation. This structural reconfiguration supports the sustainment of adaptive work across the school.

Table 3. Organizational Reconfigurations to Support Kurikulum Merdeka

Structural element	Adaptive modification	Intended educational benefit
Timetabling	Creating extended blocks for interdisciplinary projects	Deeper, less fragmented learning experiences
Leadership roles	Appointing teacher leaders for curriculum and projects	Distributed leadership and innovation capacity
Quality assurance	Integrating Kurikulum Merdeka indicators into monitoring	Alignment between reform goals and internal review
Budget priorities	Prioritizing PD and learning resources over minor capital	Strengthened instructional quality and resources
School routines	Scheduling regular reflection forums and exhibitions	Culture of continuous improvement and celebration

Table 3 shows how principals' structural adaptations seek to create enabling conditions for pedagogical and cultural shifts. By aligning timetables, leadership roles, and quality assurance systems with Kurikulum Merdeka, principals move beyond symbolic compliance toward building organizational infrastructures that sustain deep learning, teacher collaboration, and continuous quality improvement. These reconfigurations are adaptive because they are responsive to context and involve experimentation, negotiation, and revision rather than mere implementation of centrally prescribed structures.

The final dimension of the adaptive leadership model centers on building collaborative relationships with parents and communities. Principals recognized that successful implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka requires shifts not only in internal school practices but also in stakeholder expectations and support. Some parents initially questioned the value of project-based and character-focused learning, perceiving it as less rigorous than traditional content-heavy instruction, while others were concerned about resource demands. Adaptive principals responded by organizing dialogue sessions, showcasing student projects, and inviting parents and community members to participate in school activities.

Leadership narratives highlighted initiatives similar in spirit to the "Gotong Royong Sekolah" program described in earlier Indonesian research, which mobilized parents and community partners to help overcome resource limitations and strengthen school–community ties. Principals framed community engagement as a form of mutual support and shared responsibility, aligning it with cultural norms of gotong royong (mutual cooperation). They also engaged local organizations, universities, and businesses

as partners in project-based learning, thereby expanding learning opportunities and contextual relevance for students.

Table 4. Community Engagement Practices in Support of Kurikulum Merdeka

Engagement strategy	Description of practice	Observed impact on school life
Parent dialogue forums	Regular meetings to explain curriculum changes and gather feedback	Increased parental understanding and trust
Project exhibitions	Public showcases of student projects involving community audiences	Enhanced recognition of student learning
Resource mobilization	Community contributions of expertise, materials, or facilities	Mitigation of resource gaps and richer learning
Partnership agreements	Collaboration with local institutions for thematic projects	More contextualized and authentic learning tasks
Volunteer programs	Parent and alumni involvement in mentoring and extracurriculars	Stronger sense of shared responsibility for quality

As indicated in Table 4, these community engagement practices contribute to building a collaborative culture in which parents and community members become allies in educational improvement rather than passive observers or critics. The alignment with Kurikulum Merdeka's emphasis on contextual, project-based learning and character formation is evident in how community resources are integrated into learning experiences. Principals' adaptive leadership is reflected in their ability to frame reform not as an administrative mandate but as a shared journey that harnesses local social capital.

Discussion

The adaptive leadership model derived from this phenomenological study reinforces and extends existing knowledge about principal leadership and educational quality in Indonesia. Prior research has underscored that principal leadership significantly influences teacher quality, teacher performance, and school effectiveness through mechanisms such as strategic supervision, professional development facilitation, and participatory decision-making. The present model specifies how these mechanisms are reconfigured under Kurikulum Merdeka, highlighting the centrality of adaptive work that addresses both technical and cultural dimensions of change (Surbakti & Siti Aisyah, 2024).

First, the dimension of diagnosing contextual–curricular challenges aligns closely with the core premise of adaptive leadership that leaders must distinguish between technical problems and adaptive challenges and must understand systemic dynamics before acting. Principals' efforts to map teacher understanding, student diversity, resource constraints, and parental expectations indicate an orientation toward holistic diagnosis rather than narrow compliance. This resonates with empirical observations in Indonesian case studies where principals who critically assess their schools' internal and external environments are better able to articulate contextually appropriate strategies for

improvement. Under Kurikulum Merdeka, where curricular flexibility is coupled with ambitious competency and character goals, such diagnostic sensitivity is indispensable (Hilman & Tejawiani, 2025).

Second, the focus on orchestrating teacher learning and professional community extends findings from earlier studies that identified teacher empowerment and professional development as key channels through which leadership affects classroom practice. In the adaptive model, principals do not merely provide training; they curate ongoing, collaborative processes—such as lesson study, peer mentoring, and reflective dialogue—that allow teachers to internalize and experiment with the principles of Kurikulum Merdeka. This approach reflects recommendations from adaptive leadership scholarship that leaders create holding environments where people can engage in difficult work safely, learn from one another, and take ownership of change. It also aligns with policy aspirations that teachers become autonomous professionals capable of designing contextually relevant learning experiences rather than passive implementers of centralized syllabi (Özge Sağbaş et al., 2025).

Third, the reconfiguration of organizational structures and resource use illustrates how adaptive leadership translates diagnos-tic insights and teacher learning needs into concrete institutional arrangements. The strategic adjustments in timetabling, leadership roles, quality assurance systems, and budget priorities demonstrate that principals treat the school as a dynamic system in which structures can be redesigned to support new practices. This is consistent with international and Indonesian literature on leadership and quality management, which stresses that effective principals embed improvement priorities into organizational routines and monitoring systems. The adaptive contribution of the model lies in showing that these structural changes are not one-size-fits-all, but are iteratively refined in response to feedback from teachers, students, and communities (Balona & S. Digo, 2024).

Fourth, the dimension of cultivating collaborative cultures with parents and communities operationalizes Kurikulum Merdeka's rhetorical commitment to contextual and project-based learning by leveraging local social capital. Studies of adaptive leadership in Indonesian schools have previously highlighted initiatives such as "Gotong Royong Sekolah" as effective strategies to address resource limitations and to foster strong school–community ties. The present model situates such initiatives within a broader adaptive framework, suggesting that community engagement is not a peripheral or optional activity but a structural component of leadership work under Kurikulum Merdeka. By reframing reform as a shared responsibility and integrating community resources into student projects, principals help align stakeholder expectations with new pedagogical paradigms and reinforce the relevance of schooling to everyday life (Kurniadiningsih & Miftahuddin, 2025).

The model also contributes to theoretical discourse on adaptive leadership by illustrating how adaptive work is shaped by policy context in a centralized yet increasingly decentralized education system. Kurikulum Merdeka combines national-level prescriptions (e.g., Profil Pelajar Pancasila, project themes) with enhanced school autonomy in curriculum design and pedagogy. This hybrid configuration creates both constraints and opportunities for adaptive leadership. On one hand, principals must align with national frameworks and accountability pressures; on the other, they have space to exercise professional judgment in tailoring curricula and organizational structures. The phenomenological data suggest that principals leverage this space by engaging in local diagnosis, collaborative problem-solving, and structural redesign, thereby mediating

between macro-level policy and micro-level practice.

From a methodological standpoint, the use of phenomenology and Miles and Huberman's interactive model of qualitative analysis is consistent with Indonesian research traditions and proves well-suited to capturing the complexities of leadership under reform. Through in-depth engagement with principals' narratives and practices, the study identifies themes that might be overlooked in more survey-based or purely descriptive case study approaches, such as the emotional labor of leadership, the calibration of change tempo, and the negotiation of value tensions with parents. These nuanced insights underscore the importance of qualitative methodologies in leadership research, particularly when examining adaptive processes that involve identity, culture, and meaning.

At the same time, the findings raise important questions for future research and policy. The model suggests that principals' adaptive capacity is crucial for effective Kurikulum Merdeka implementation, yet many existing leadership development programs remain heavily focused on administrative and technical competencies. There is a need for leadership preparation and in-service training that explicitly cultivates adaptive skills, including systems diagnosis, facilitation of collaborative learning, conflict management, and strategic communication. Evidence from professional development programs for school administrators indicates that targeted training on distinguishing technical and adaptive challenges, diagnosing systems, and mobilizing stakeholders can enhance leaders' ability to navigate change. Embedding such content in Indonesian principal training frameworks could help scale the kinds of practices identified in this study.

Furthermore, while the model highlights promising practices, it also implicitly acknowledges structural and systemic constraints that limit principals' adaptive work. These include resource shortages, bureaucratic burdens, conflicting policy signals, and uneven support from local education authorities. Policy makers should therefore consider how regulations, accountability mechanisms, and resource allocation patterns either enable or inhibit adaptive leadership. For instance, monitoring and evaluation systems that emphasize compliance with procedural indicators rather than the quality of learning processes may inadvertently discourage experimentation and risk-taking. Aligning accountability frameworks with the core aims of Kurikulum Merdeka—deep learning, character development, and contextualized pedagogy—could create a more supportive environment for adaptive leadership.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study articulates a model of adaptive leadership enacted by Indonesian school principals in improving education quality under Kurikulum Merdeka. The model comprises four interrelated dimensions: diagnosing contextual–curricular challenges, orchestrating teacher learning and professional community, reconfiguring organizational structures and resource use, and cultivating collaborative cultures with parents and communities. These dimensions demonstrate how principals move beyond technical compliance to engage in deeper adaptive work that reshapes beliefs, practices, and structures in pursuit of more relevant, holistic, and equitable education. The model is consistent with and extends existing Indonesian and international research on principal leadership, educational quality management, and adaptive leadership in times of change. Practically, the findings underscore the need for leadership development and policy frameworks that explicitly support adaptive

capacities, align accountability with Kurikulum Merdeka's core aims, and strengthen collaborative partnerships across school and community. Further empirical research, including comparative and longitudinal studies, is warranted to deepen understanding of how adaptive leadership can be cultivated and sustained across diverse Indonesian educational contexts.

Suggestion

School principals are advised to systematically integrate adaptive leadership competencies into their daily managerial routines by institutionalizing collaborative teacher learning forums, data-informed instructional supervision, and structured reflection on Kurikulum Merdeka implementation. Principals should also prioritize inclusive engagement with parents and community stakeholders to ensure that project-based learning and Profil Pelajar Pancasila are contextually grounded and socially supported. Teachers are encouraged to actively participate in professional learning communities, experiment with differentiated and project-based learning designs, and engage in peer observation and feedback cycles to internalize the principles of Kurikulum Merdeka. By positioning themselves as co-learners with school leaders, teachers can contribute to a shared culture of inquiry and innovation that enhances overall education quality. Policy makers and district authorities should redesign leadership preparation and in-service training programs to emphasize adaptive leadership capabilities, including system diagnosis, change management, collaboration facilitation, and strategic communication. In addition, monitoring and evaluation systems should be realigned to value deep learning processes, character development, and contextual innovation, rather than focusing narrowly on procedural compliance.

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