



Enhancing Educational Quality: The Role of Principal Instructional Leadership in Senior High Schools

Delissa Apriliyanti*, Akil, Achmad Taufik Ismail

Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, Indonesia

Email : 2210631120072@student.unsika.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

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*Corresponding Author

This study aims to analyze the instructional leadership strategies employed by school principals in managing learning programs during the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative case study approach was used to explore leadership practices in depth. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the principal, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, and subject teachers. Informants were selected using snowball sampling, while data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation. The findings reveal that the principal implemented three key instructional leadership strategies based on Hallinger's model: establishing and communicating clear school goals, managing curriculum implementation effectively, and fostering a positive school climate. These strategies helped maintain the stability of instructional quality throughout the curriculum transition process. In addition, the implementation of these strategies was associated with a significant increase in student admissions through the National Achievement-Based Selection pathway, rising from 9 to 36 students. The study implies that effective instructional leadership plays a crucial role in supporting curriculum change, reducing implementation challenges, and sustaining educational quality during periods of policy transition. School leaders are therefore encouraged to strengthen strategic planning, curriculum management, and collaborative school cultures to ensure successful curriculum implementation.

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INTRODUCTION

Curriculum reform has become one of the most influential educational policies in contemporary society because it directly affects the quality of learning, educational equity, and the readiness of future generations to face social and economic changes (Chang et al., 2021; U-Sayee & Adomako, 2021). In Indonesia, the transition toward a more flexible and student-centered curriculum reflects

the government's effort to improve educational outcomes and develop competencies relevant to the twenty-first century. Such reforms are important because schools serve as strategic institutions that prepare human resources capable of adapting to rapidly changing environments. Evidence from various educational reforms demonstrates that curriculum changes influence not only classroom practices but also organizational behavior, teacher professionalism, and institutional performance (Zainuddin et al., 2025). Consequently, successful curriculum implementation requires strong leadership, effective management, and organizational readiness. Therefore, understanding how educational leaders manage curriculum transitions is essential because the success or failure of curriculum reform ultimately affects students, teachers, schools, and society as a whole.

Despite the intended benefits of curriculum reform, educational institutions often encounter substantial difficulties during implementation. Shifts in curriculum policy direction require teachers to modify instructional planning, learning materials, assessment systems, and classroom management practices simultaneously (Safitri et al., 2024). These adjustments frequently increase administrative workloads, create uncertainty regarding instructional expectations, and generate psychological pressure among educators. Research indicates that curriculum transitions often produce resistance among teachers because they must adapt to new pedagogical approaches while maintaining learning quality under changing regulations (Rosyada et al., 2024). Furthermore, schools may experience organizational strain when resources, professional development opportunities, and institutional support systems are insufficient to facilitate adaptation. As a result, curriculum reform can unintentionally reduce the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. These challenges highlight the need for leadership approaches capable of supporting educators while ensuring that organizational objectives continue to be achieved throughout periods of educational transformation.

The complexity of curriculum implementation becomes even more evident when schools are required to operate multiple curriculum systems simultaneously. In many Indonesian public high schools, the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum has created conditions in which different grade levels follow different curricular frameworks within the same institution (Mansur & Sukirman, 2024). Such circumstances demand the parallel management of instructional planning, assessment procedures, reporting mechanisms, and professional development activities. In practice, teachers often experience emotional resistance toward new instructional approaches, particularly those who have developed long-standing routines under previous curriculum models. Variations in students' academic preparedness further

complicate implementation efforts, while limited institutional resources frequently constrain access to training and capacity-building programs. These realities illustrate that curriculum change is not merely a technical process but also a complex organizational challenge requiring strategic leadership intervention to maintain instructional quality and organizational stability (Li et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2024).

Previous studies have extensively examined curriculum implementation and educational leadership during periods of policy change (Elfira et al., 2024; Rodrigues & De Lima, 2021). Several scholars have reported that instructional leadership contributes positively to teacher performance, instructional effectiveness, and school improvement initiatives (Rahmi et al., 2023; Nathan & Zainudin, 2025). Other studies have emphasized that successful curriculum implementation depends on the ability of school leaders to facilitate professional learning, coordinate organizational resources, and establish a shared vision among stakeholders (Bush, 2020; Siswadi et al., 2026). Research based on instructional leadership theory also demonstrates that school principals play a critical role in guiding teachers through educational reforms and maintaining instructional quality during transitions. However, much of the existing literature focuses on the outcomes of instructional leadership rather than examining how leadership strategies are operationalized in schools facing simultaneous implementation of two curriculum systems. Consequently, the practical mechanisms through which principals manage curriculum dualism remain insufficiently explored.

The theoretical framework most frequently used to analyze instructional leadership is Philip Hallinger's model, which conceptualizes leadership through three dimensions: defining the school mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive school learning climate (Hallinger et al., 2020). Numerous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of these dimensions in improving school performance and supporting educational reform (Gechere et al., 2025; Karakose et al., 2024). Nevertheless, existing research generally investigates Hallinger's framework in relatively stable organizational contexts rather than in situations characterized by curriculum dualism, institutional uncertainty, and resource limitations. Furthermore, previous studies often emphasize quantitative measurements of leadership effectiveness while providing limited insight into the lived experiences and strategic actions of school leaders during curriculum transitions. This gap is significant because understanding leadership practices in complex transitional environments may provide valuable knowledge for educational institutions facing similar policy changes and organizational challenges (Rejaan et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025).

This study offers a novel contribution by examining instructional leadership within the context of simultaneous curriculum implementation, where educational leaders must manage competing instructional demands while maintaining organizational effectiveness. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on leadership outcomes, this research explores the strategic processes through which school principals facilitate adaptation, reduce resistance, and sustain instructional quality during curriculum transition. The study integrates Hallinger's instructional leadership framework with the practical realities of curriculum dualism, thereby extending existing theoretical understanding of leadership in transitional educational settings. Furthermore, it highlights how instructional leadership can function as an organizational mechanism for balancing policy compliance, teacher support, and student achievement. Given the continuing implementation of curriculum reforms in Indonesia, investigating these leadership strategies is important for generating evidence-based recommendations that can support schools experiencing similar challenges.

Based on the aforementioned issues, this study seeks to answer the following research question: how does instructional leadership contribute to the management of learning programs during the transition between the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum? This research argues that effective instructional leadership serves as a critical mechanism for maintaining instructional quality, reducing teacher resistance, and facilitating organizational adaptation during curriculum reform. Through the dimensions proposed by Hallinger, school principals are expected to align institutional goals, coordinate curriculum implementation, and cultivate a supportive learning climate that enables successful transition processes. By investigating these leadership practices in depth, this study contributes to the development of instructional leadership theory and provides practical insights for educational policymakers, school leaders, and practitioners seeking to manage curriculum change more effectively in dynamic educational environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore in depth the instructional leadership strategies implemented during the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to understand social processes, leadership practices, and participants' experiences within their natural context rather than to measure variables quantitatively. The case study design was considered appropriate because it enables a comprehensive examination of a contemporary phenomenon within a specific institutional setting, allowing researchers to capture the complexity of leadership actions, interactions, and decision-making

processes during curriculum change. Through this approach, the study aimed to generate a rich and contextualized understanding of how instructional leadership was enacted and experienced by school stakeholders throughout the curriculum transition period.

The research was conducted at SMAN 1 Telagasari, a public senior high school that was simultaneously implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and the 2013 Curriculum at different grade levels. This site was intentionally selected because it represented a unique institutional context in which curriculum dualism required substantial leadership intervention and organizational adaptation. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, passive participatory observations, and document analysis. Informants were selected using a snowball sampling technique, beginning with the principal as the key informant due to his strategic role in educational decision-making. Subsequent informants were identified based on recommendations from previous participants and included the vice principal for curriculum affairs and subject teachers. Data collection continued until information saturation was reached, indicated by the recurrence of similar themes and the absence of substantial new findings.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. During the data condensation stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence were organized, coded, and reduced into meaningful categories. The data were then presented in the form of narrative descriptions to facilitate interpretation and pattern identification. Finally, conclusions were continuously verified through comparison across data sources and collection methods. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied source triangulation and methodological triangulation by comparing information obtained from different informants, observations, and institutional documents. These procedures enhanced the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings indicate that the principal implemented instructional leadership through three interconnected dimensions: formulating and communicating school goals, managing curriculum implementation, and creating a positive school climate during the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. These dimensions were carried out through various leadership practices that involved teachers, school management teams, and other

educational stakeholders. Data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis revealed that instructional leadership was not implemented through a centralized approach but through collaborative mechanisms that encouraged participation and shared responsibility among school members.

Regarding the formulation of school goals, the principal adopted a participatory approach involving vice principals, the quality assurance team, and teachers in annual strategic meetings. School goals were formulated by considering local educational conditions, student characteristics, community backgrounds, and institutional capacities. Informants explained that the annual meetings functioned as a forum for discussing institutional priorities, identifying challenges arising from curriculum change, and determining realistic targets that could be achieved collectively. Through this process, the school developed a shared understanding regarding the direction of educational programs and the expected outcomes of curriculum implementation.

The transition to the Merdeka Curriculum was implemented gradually, with grades ten and eleven adopting the new curriculum while grade twelve continued using the 2013 Curriculum. According to participants, this phased implementation strategy reduced organizational disruption and allowed teachers sufficient time to adapt to new instructional requirements. Teachers from various subject areas translated the agreed vision into instructional practices through literacy development, environmental awareness programs, character education activities, and the strengthening of student competencies. Religious education teachers integrated character-building activities through congregational worship and morning religious programs, while science teachers emphasized digital literacy and project-based learning activities. The implementation of these collectively agreed goals contributed to a substantial increase in student admissions through the National Selection Based on Achievement pathway, rising from six students to thirty-six students within one academic year.

In the area of curriculum management, teachers initially experienced difficulties adapting to new administrative requirements, including the preparation of Teaching Modules, Learning Objective Sequences, and Criteria for Achieving Learning Objectives (Taufiqurrahman et al., 2025). Several teachers described the early phase of implementation as challenging because they were unfamiliar with the structure and technical requirements of the new curriculum documents. To address these challenges, the principal organized periodic In-House Training programs and curriculum workshops before each academic year. These activities focused on strengthening teachers' understanding of curriculum concepts, improving instructional planning skills, and providing opportunities for collaborative discussion regarding implementation problems encountered in classrooms.

Due to budget limitations, the school developed an internal mentoring system by appointing experienced teachers as peer coaches. These teacher leaders provided continuous assistance through formal and informal discussions, document sharing, and collaborative problem-solving activities (Hussen & Onia, 2024). Mentoring activities were conducted through teacher discussion groups, online communication platforms, and direct consultation sessions among colleagues. Teachers reported that this approach enabled them to obtain practical guidance more quickly and reduced dependence on external training programs. Student learning progress was monitored through periodic evaluations conducted during the semester and synchronized with supervision mechanisms from educational authorities. Evaluation results were subsequently used as a basis for reviewing instructional implementation and identifying areas requiring further improvement.

The findings also reveal that the principal fostered a positive school climate through a humanistic supervision model. Academic supervision was conducted systematically by the principal and delegated supervisory teams (Chang et al., 2021). Classroom observations were followed by reflective dialogue sessions in which teachers received constructive feedback regarding instructional strengths and areas for improvement. Rather than emphasizing inspection and control, supervision was implemented as a collaborative professional development process (Arokiasamy et al., 2025). Teachers reported feeling more comfortable discussing instructional difficulties and receiving recommendations for improvement. This approach reduced teacher anxiety during the curriculum transition, strengthened confidence in implementing new instructional practices, and encouraged continuous improvement in classroom teaching. As a result, a supportive professional environment was established, enabling teachers to adapt more effectively to curriculum changes while maintaining the quality of student learning.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that instructional leadership during curriculum transition was primarily manifested through participatory goal formulation, collaborative curriculum management, and the creation of a supportive school climate. These findings are consistent with Hallinger's instructional leadership framework, which emphasizes defining the school mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive learning climate as the core dimensions of effective school leadership (Hallinger et al., 2020). The participatory approach employed by the principal confirms that instructional leadership is most effective when organizational goals are collectively constructed rather than imposed through hierarchical decision-making. This

finding supports the argument that school mission alignment enhances organizational commitment and promotes shared responsibility for educational outcomes.

The study further reveals that participatory goal-setting strengthened teachers' sense of ownership and commitment during curriculum reform. This finding aligns with the argument that instructional leadership begins with the successful alignment of institutional goals and stakeholder expectations. Similarly, Hidayat et al. (2025) found that teacher involvement in school planning contributes positively to professional loyalty and classroom commitment. However, the present study extends these findings by demonstrating that participatory mission formulation is particularly important in situations characterized by curriculum dualism, where schools must simultaneously manage different curricular frameworks. In such contexts, collective goal-setting serves not only as a leadership strategy but also as an organizational adaptation mechanism that reduces resistance to change.

The findings related to curriculum management also support previous research emphasizing the importance of leadership support during educational reform. The challenges experienced by teachers in adapting to new administrative requirements are consistent with observations reported by Zulaiha et al. (2022), who identified curriculum transition as a major source of professional uncertainty among educators. Similarly, Rahmi et al. (2023) emphasized that instructional leadership contributes to successful curriculum implementation through supervision and continuous professional assistance. Nevertheless, this study provides additional insight by showing how internal peer coaching emerged as an effective alternative when financial resources were limited. Unlike many previous studies that emphasize externally facilitated professional development, the present findings highlight the strategic role of teacher leaders as sustainable agents of organizational learning.

The humanistic supervision practices identified in this study are also consistent with previous literature emphasizing collaborative and reflective approaches to instructional supervision. Hasudungan (2022) argues that supportive supervision reduces teacher anxiety and promotes instructional innovation, while Etiyaningsih et al. (2023) found that empathetic clinical supervision strengthens teachers' intrinsic motivation. The findings of this study reinforce these conclusions by demonstrating that supervision becomes more effective when it is perceived as professional assistance rather than bureaucratic control. Furthermore, the results support Juniardi and Rizqa (2024), who contend that psychologically safe school environments encourage teachers to maximize their professional contributions toward student learning and character development.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the development of instructional leadership theory by extending Hallinger's framework into the context of curriculum dualism and educational policy transition. Existing studies generally examine instructional leadership in relatively stable educational environments; however, this research demonstrates that Hallinger's three dimensions remain relevant even under conditions of organizational uncertainty and simultaneous curriculum implementation. The findings suggest that instructional leadership functions not only as a mechanism for improving teaching quality but also as a strategic process for managing institutional adaptation during periods of systemic educational change. This perspective enriches the conceptual understanding of instructional leadership within transitional educational settings.

From a practical perspective, the study offers evidence-based recommendations for school leaders and policymakers responsible for curriculum reform. The findings indicate that successful curriculum transition requires participatory planning, internal professional learning systems, and humanistic supervision practices capable of reducing resistance and strengthening teacher capacity. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on instructional leadership strategies within a dual-curriculum environment, a context that has received limited scholarly attention. By demonstrating how participatory leadership, peer coaching, and reflective supervision collectively supported organizational adaptation and improved student outcomes, this research contributes both theoretically and practically to the growing body of knowledge on instructional leadership and curriculum change management.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that effective instructional leadership plays a critical role in managing curriculum transition by integrating participatory goal-setting, collaborative curriculum management, and humanistic supervision practices. The most important lesson learned is that curriculum change can be implemented successfully when school leaders prioritize collective ownership, continuous professional support, and a supportive organizational climate rather than relying solely on administrative compliance. The findings show that involving teachers in school mission formulation, utilizing peer coaching through Teacher Leaders, and transforming supervision into a reflective professional dialogue can reduce resistance to change, strengthen teacher capacity, and sustain instructional quality during periods of policy transition. Academically, this study contributes to the instructional leadership literature by extending Hallinger's framework to the context of curriculum dualism, demonstrating how leadership functions as a mechanism for organizational

adaptation under conditions of educational change. However, this research is limited to a single case study in one public senior high school, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to different educational contexts. Future studies are therefore recommended to examine instructional leadership across multiple schools, educational levels, or regions using comparative and mixed-method approaches to generate broader insights into leadership strategies during curriculum reform.

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