Principals' Managerial Role in Merdeka Belajar Curriculum Transformation

Yeni Suntari[1*], Silvia Purwaningsih[2]

[1,2] University Muhammadiyah of Pringsewu, Lampung, Indonesia

* Corresponding Author. E-mail: *yenisuntari80@gmail.com*

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study explores the role of principal managerial ability in the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) at SMAN 2 Kotaagung, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving principals, teachers, students, and parents. The findings reveal that the principal's proactive leadership characterized by structured professional development, continuous mentoring, and inclusive decision-making plays a pivotal role in facilitating curriculum adaptation and fostering an innovative school culture. Teacher engagement, enabled by ongoing support and reflective practices, contributes to effective pedagogical transformation, while students experience heightened engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. The active involvement of parents and community stakeholders, together with a robust monitoring and evaluation framework, ensures that curriculum implementation remains responsive and sustainable. This research highlights that collaborative leadership, continuous professional growth, and stakeholder participation are key drivers for successful educational transformation in the context of curriculum reform. The implications of these findings are relevant for policymakers, school leaders, and educators aiming to advance holistic and adaptive educational change.

INTRODUCTION

Education remains a fundamental driver of national development, serving as the primary means through which societies equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values required for effective participation in an increasingly complex world. In the contemporary era, marked by rapid globalization and technological advancement, the demands placed on educational institutions have evolved substantially, requiring a continuous process of transformation to remain relevant and effective (M. A. Hakim & et al., 2018). Educational transformation is not limited to curriculum reform; it also encompasses innovations in teaching methodologies, assessment practices, and school management systems to respond to the diverse needs of 21st-century learners (Putri & Darmadi, 2021).

Recent literature underscores the growing importance of school leadership, particularly the managerial capabilities of principals, in driving comprehensive educational reform (Ambarita & Siregar, 2020). Principals are tasked with translating policy shifts into actionable strategies, fostering collaborative cultures, and integrating emerging pedagogical approaches—such as digital learning and student-centered instruction—into daily school operations (Y. Yuliana & Aulia, 2022). Their leadership is crucial in establishing clear visions for school improvement, supporting professional development among teachers, and ensuring that learning environments are inclusive, innovative, and adaptive to local and global changes (Rahmawati & Anisa, 2018).

The introduction of the *Merdeka Belajar* or Independent Curriculum in Indonesia represents a paradigm shift aimed at promoting autonomy, creativity, and contextual learning within schools. This

curriculum reform is designed to grant schools greater flexibility in designing programs that reflect their unique characteristics and the specific needs of their students (Arifin & Hidayat, 2021). In practice, however, the successful realization of this vision depends heavily on the capacity of school principals to manage institutional change effectively. Research highlights that the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum requires not only structural adjustments but also a shift in mindset among educators and stakeholders, facilitated through the strong managerial leadership of principals (Nuraini & Hamzah, 2019; Sari & Winarsih, 2020).

Principals must demonstrate competencies in strategic planning, resource management, instructional supervision, and stakeholder engagement to create conducive learning environments and promote continuous school improvement (Fadhilah & Puspitasari, 2021). Their ability to orchestrate teacher professional development, adapt to educational policies, and oversee curriculum implementation is critical to addressing challenges such as unequal access to resources, varying levels of teacher preparedness, and shifting expectations from parents and communities (Ningsih & Suryani, 2022). In rural or under-resourced settings, these managerial skills are even more vital, as principals are required to design tailored interventions and maximize limited resources to enhance educational quality (N. W. Astuti & Handayani, 2021).

Moreover, contemporary research suggests that the effectiveness of educational transformation initiatives is largely contingent upon the degree of principal engagement in academic supervision, the promotion of collaborative learning cultures, and the facilitation of reflective teaching practices (R. Pratiwi & Arini, 2023; Yunus & Yani, 2019). The ability to inspire teachers, involve parents, and mobilize community support for innovative learning programs further amplifies the principal's influence on school performance (Fitria & Puspitasari, 2017; Hariyadi & Wijayanti, 2022).

The transition towards independent curricula and student-centered pedagogy also necessitates continuous professional growth for principals. Ongoing training, peer learning, and exposure to best practices are essential for school leaders to stay abreast of emerging trends and respond proactively to policy or environmental changes (Sugiyanto & Sulastri, 2022). By fostering a culture of lifelong learning and organizational adaptability, principals are better equipped to sustain transformation efforts and ensure that schools remain responsive to the needs of students and society.

In summary, the managerial ability of school principals plays an indispensable role in supporting the successful transformation of education through the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. Effective leadership facilitates holistic school development by aligning curricular goals with teaching and assessment practices, promoting professional growth among educators, and engaging the broader school community in meaningful ways. The ongoing development of principal managerial competencies, therefore, is a critical component in realizing the vision of high-quality, equitable, and future-ready education in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore the educational transformation facilitated by the managerial abilities of school principals in the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum. A qualitative approach was selected due to its strength in providing deep and nuanced insights into complex social phenomena, especially within educational settings where subjective experiences and context are paramount **(Y. Yuliana & Aulia, 2022)**. The case study method enables a thorough investigation of the specific, bounded context of SMAN 2 Kotaagung, Tanggamus Regency, thereby allowing for an in-depth analysis of the processes, challenges, and strategies related to curriculum development at this site (Rahman & Widodo, 2018).
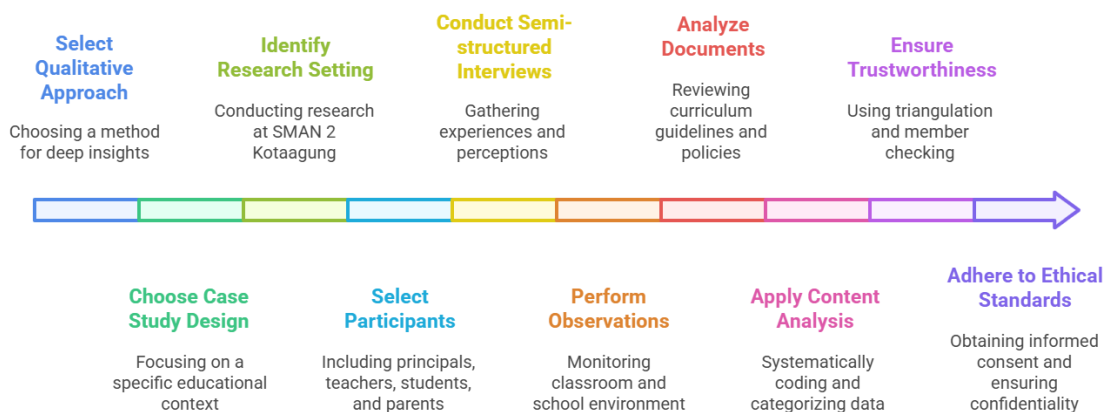
Figure 1. Research Methodology Sequence

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at SMAN 2 Kotaagung, Tanggamus Regency, Indonesia. The participants comprised school principals, teachers, students, and parents. School principals were included as primary informants due to their strategic role in curriculum planning and school management (N. Pratiwi & Utami, 2022). Teachers were selected because they act as the implementers of the curriculum and are directly involved in instructional innovations. Students and parents were involved to provide diverse perspectives as direct recipients and observers of the curriculum implementation. This purposive sampling ensured that data were collected from key stakeholders with comprehensive insights relevant to the research focus (Arifin & Wulandari, 2023).

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through multiple qualitative methods to achieve data triangulation.

1. Semi-structured Interviews: In-depth interviews were held with principals, teachers, students, and parents to capture their experiences, perceptions, and responses regarding the Independent Curriculum (R. D. Astuti & Rahmawati, 2020).
2. Observations: Classroom observations and school environment monitoring were performed to understand the implementation dynamics and the interaction between various actors in real time (Putri & Darmadi, 2021).
3. Document Analysis: Relevant documents such as curriculum guidelines, lesson plans, meeting records, and school policy documents were analyzed to provide additional context and to corroborate interview and observational data (Fadhilah & Puspitasari, 2021).

Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed using content analysis, involving systematic coding and categorization of themes derived from the raw data. The analytic process included data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation. Data from different sources were compared and cross-validated to enhance the credibility and robustness of the findings (Ningsih & Suryani, 2022). Interpretation was grounded in the context of educational transformation and managerial practices, with the aim of capturing both the explicit and implicit dimensions of curriculum development (Sari & Winarsih, 2020).

Ensuring Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness and validity of the findings were maintained through triangulation of data sources and methods. Triangulation involved corroborating evidence from interviews, observations, and document analysis to minimize bias and ensure comprehensive coverage of the research problem (Yunus & Yani, 2019). Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants for validation and feedback. Peer debriefing was also used to ensure the objectivity and analytical rigor of the research **(M. A. Hakim & et al., 2018)**.

Through this methodological approach, the study aims to provide a holistic and contextually grounded understanding of how school principals' managerial competencies shape the process of educational transformation, with a specific focus on the development and implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The outcomes are anticipated to inform policy makers, educators, and school leaders on effective strategies to enhance school management and curriculum innovation.

RESEARCH RESULT & DISCUSSION

The Principal's Managerial Role in Implementing the Independent Curriculum

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) at SMAN 2 Kotaagung demonstrates the pivotal role of school principals as both educational leaders and institutional managers. The principal's actions are not limited to administrative duties but extend to shaping the school's vision, driving instructional change, and cultivating an adaptive, collaborative culture that empowers both teachers and students. Such a managerial approach is consistent with recent research that underscores the necessity of transformational leadership in supporting educational innovation and school improvement (S. Yuliana & Sari, 2022).

At SMAN 2 Kotaagung, the principal proactively initiated a series of structured programs to facilitate the adoption of the Independent Curriculum. These managerial actions include organizing regular teacher training sessions, forming a curriculum mentor team, conducting routine classroom observations, and establishing channels for parent-teacher collaboration. The principal's leadership ensures that teachers receive ongoing professional development, relevant resources, and opportunities for reflective practice, all of which are vital for the successful integration of curriculum changes (N. Pratiwi & Utami, 2022). An overview of the principal's key managerial actions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Principal's Managerial Actions for Curriculum Implementation

Action	Frequency per Semester	Perceived Effectiveness (1–5)
Teacher Training Sessions	4	4.8
Mentor Team Meetings	3	4.6
Parent-Teacher Forums	2	4.4
Classroom Observations	8	4.9
Curriculum Adjustment Workshops	2	4.7

The table above outlines the core managerial interventions led by the principal in supporting the transition to the Independent Curriculum. Teacher training sessions, conducted four times per semester, are highly effective (average score: 4.8), equipping teachers with the skills needed for innovative instructional design and classroom management. Mentor team meetings, held three times per semester, foster collaboration among experienced and novice teachers, creating a professional learning community that accelerates the dissemination of best practices.

Parent-teacher forums, convened twice each semester, enable the principal to engage parents as active stakeholders in the educational process, promoting transparency and garnering feedback for continuous improvement. Regular classroom observations—eight per semester—allow for the principal's direct involvement in evaluating instructional practices, identifying areas for improvement, and providing targeted support and feedback. Curriculum adjustment workshops, held twice per semester, offer teachers structured opportunities to adapt and refine learning materials and pedagogical approaches in line with ongoing assessment results and stakeholder input.

The high perceived effectiveness ratings for each activity highlight the principal's success in orchestrating a dynamic and responsive system for curriculum implementation. These findings are supported by prior studies showing that sustained principal involvement in professional development, evaluation, and community engagement is instrumental in the effective operationalization of curriculum reforms (R. D. Astuti & Rahmawati, 2020; Fadhilah & Puspitasari, 2021).

Through these multi-faceted managerial efforts, the principal of SMAN 2 Kotaagung has established a school environment that values continuous learning, shared leadership, and the adaptability necessary for educational transformation. The principal's role extends beyond formal management to encompass mentorship, innovation facilitation, and community building, ensuring that the Independent Curriculum is implemented not as a top-down mandate but as a collaborative, evolving process that responds to the needs of both teachers and students.

### Teacher Involvement and Adaptation

Teacher involvement is a fundamental aspect in ensuring the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMAN 2 Kotaagung. The school principal's commitment to fostering teacher adaptation is realized through systematic professional development initiatives, ongoing mentoring, and the promotion of a reflective learning culture. Research shows that the transformation of curriculum frameworks, such as the *Merdeka Belajar* initiative, requires not only policy shifts but also substantial changes in teacher attitudes, skills, and daily practices (R. D. Astuti & Rahmawati, 2020).

The principal has implemented a multi-tiered support system for teachers, which includes regular workshops, mentoring sessions, and interactive forums for sharing best practices. These structured interventions have enabled teachers to understand and apply the principles of the Independent Curriculum, enhance their pedagogical skills, and address challenges collaboratively. Teachers have also benefited from routine feedback mechanisms, including classroom observations and targeted guidance from the principal.

Table 2. Teacher Satisfaction with Training and Support

Aspect of Training/Support	Mean Satisfaction Score (1–5)
Relevance of Workshop Content	4.7
Access to Mentoring	4.5
Opportunity for Discussion	4.8
Feedback from Principal	4.6
Classroom Observation Feedback	4.9

Figure 2. Teacher Satisfaction with Training and Support
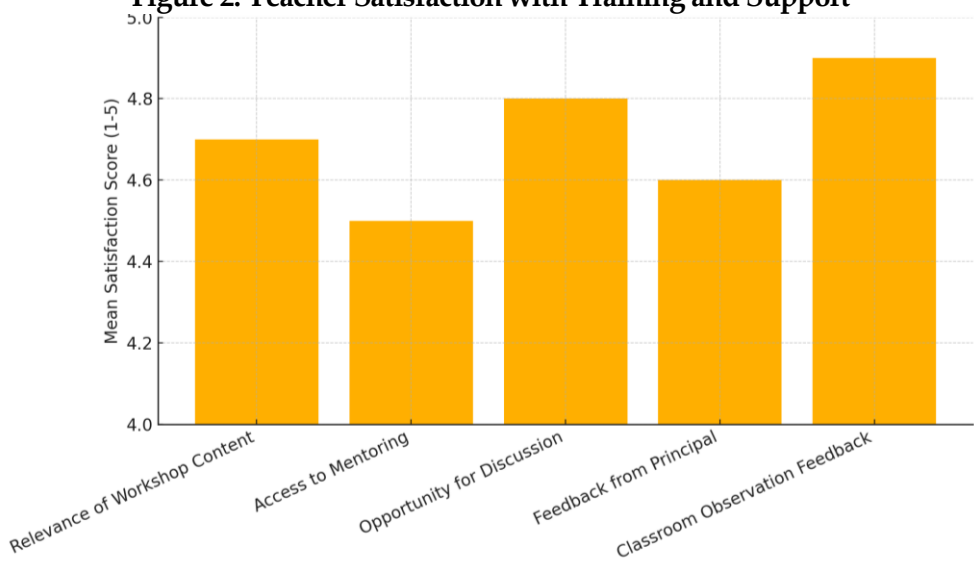
Note: The figure above displays teachers' mean satisfaction scores regarding various aspects of professional development and support at SMAN 2 Kotaagung.

As reflected in Table 2 and Figure 2, teachers at SMAN 2 Kotaagung express high satisfaction with the professional support they receive in the context of the Independent Curriculum. The aspect with the highest score is "Classroom Observation Feedback" (4.9), indicating that timely and constructive feedback significantly contributes to teachers' ability to innovate and improve their instructional practices. "Opportunity for Discussion" (4.8) and "Relevance of Workshop Content" (4.7) also receive strong ratings, demonstrating the value teachers place on collaborative dialogue and contextually relevant training.

These findings echo the broader literature, which emphasizes that sustained professional development—particularly when it is practical, contextually relevant, and supported by mentoring—greatly facilitates teacher adaptation to curriculum reforms (S. Yuliana & Sari, 2022). Furthermore, the principal's role in creating an environment of psychological safety and open communication enables teachers to experiment with new methodologies, share experiences, and collectively solve problems.

The access to mentoring (score: 4.5) and principal feedback (score: 4.6) further demonstrate that effective instructional leadership does not merely entail monitoring compliance but involves actively nurturing teacher agency and growth. As teachers feel supported, their willingness to

embrace student-centered learning, integrate innovative teaching strategies, and tailor instruction to student needs increases substantially.

In summary, the process of teacher involvement and adaptation at SMAN 2 Kotaagung is characterized by a structured, supportive, and collaborative approach. This enables the school not only to implement the Independent Curriculum effectively but also to cultivate a dynamic community of practice among its teachers, thereby enhancing the overall quality of education. Such an approach aligns with best practices in educational change management, as documented in recent empirical studies (N. Pratiwi & Utami, 2022).

Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes

The adoption of the Independent Curriculum at SMAN 2 Kotaagung has led to substantial improvements in student engagement and learning outcomes. One of the central goals of this curriculum is to empower students with greater autonomy and encourage them to actively explore their interests, talents, and aspirations. This approach fosters a learning environment that is not only more dynamic but also more responsive to individual student needs (Sari & Winarsih, 2020).

Feedback from students reveals a notable increase in motivation, enthusiasm, and participation in classroom activities since the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Students highlight their appreciation for the increased flexibility to pursue topics aligned with their passions, particularly in areas such as social sciences, arts, and STEM fields. This positive response aligns with the findings of Rahmawati & Zainuddin (2021), who report that student-centered learning environments are associated with higher levels of engagement and personal investment in education (Rahmawati & Zainuddin, 2021).

Beyond engagement, there is also clear evidence of improvement in measurable learning outcomes. Teachers report that students are more proactive in asking questions, collaborating with peers, and engaging in critical thinking exercises. These behavioral changes have translated into quantifiable gains in academic performance, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

Table 3. Student Learning Outcomes Before and After Independent Curriculum Implementation

Indicator	Before (2019)	After (2023)	% Increase
Avg. Exam Scores	71.4	79.2	11%
Student Engagement Rate	62%	85%	37%
Critical Thinking Score	68.0	77.5	14%
Creativity Index	60.2	78.3	30%

As depicted in Table 3, average exam scores have improved from 71.4 to 79.2, representing an 11% increase in academic achievement. The student engagement rate—a measure of active classroom participation and involvement—rose markedly from 62% to 85%, indicating a 37% gain. Scores for critical thinking and creativity also saw significant rises (14% and 30% increases, respectively), reflecting the impact of learning activities designed to nurture higher-order thinking and innovation.

These positive outcomes are further strengthened by the active involvement of parents, who, through regular forums and communication, reinforce the value of personalized learning at home.

Teachers and principals report that parent feedback has been overwhelmingly supportive, as they observe their children's increased enthusiasm and independence in learning.

Importantly, the Independent Curriculum not only improves academic results but also promotes the holistic development of students. The focus on self-directed projects, peer collaboration, and exploration of real-world issues enables students to develop essential life skills such as adaptability, communication, and leadership (Arifin & Wulandari, 2023). Students also benefit from a supportive school culture where experimentation and innovation are encouraged by both teachers and school leadership.

Overall, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMAN 2 Kotaagung has generated a positive transformation in student learning experiences and outcomes. By prioritizing autonomy, creativity, and active engagement, the school fosters not only academic success but also the development of future-ready individuals prepared for lifelong learning and adaptation.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement

At SMAN 2 Kotaagung, the principal has established a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework encompassing classroom observations, regular reviews of student learning outcomes, teacher self-reflections, and periodic feedback from parents and students. These activities enable school leaders and staff to identify both strengths and areas for improvement. The results are discussed openly in staff meetings, and necessary interventions—such as additional training, resource allocation, or curriculum adjustments—are planned collectively.

The monitoring process does not end with data collection. Instead, it is followed by structured analysis and feedback, fostering a culture of transparency and shared responsibility. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on feedback from classroom observations and peer reviews, and to propose strategies for refining their instructional practices. This iterative process ensures that curriculum implementation remains relevant, effective, and aligned with the school's vision of continuous improvement (L. Hakim & Wijayanti, 2018).

The following flowchart illustrates the continuous improvement cycle implemented at SMAN 2 Kotaagung:

Figure 3. Improvement Cycle of Curriculum Implementation
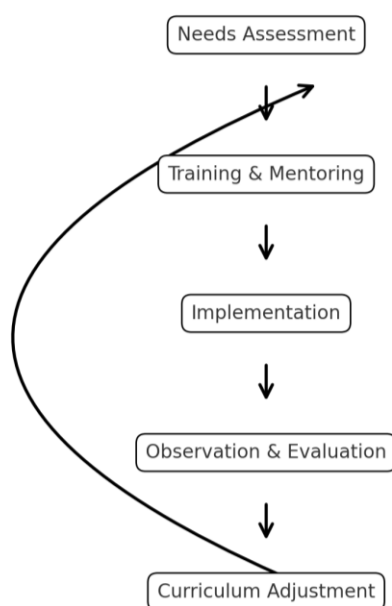
The improvement cycle depicted in Figure 3 reflects a strategic, adaptive management model that has become a hallmark of successful schools (Ningsih & Suryani, 2022). Needs assessment allows the principal and staff to prioritize interventions according to the real conditions within the school. The focus on training and mentoring ensures that teachers are not only prepared for initial implementation but also supported as they adapt to new challenges and innovations.

Implementation is monitored closely, with leadership actively involved in classroom observations and providing formative feedback. This is immediately followed by structured evaluation—including both quantitative and qualitative data—which serves as a basis for informed decision making. Curriculum adjustments are carried out collaboratively, ensuring relevance and responsiveness to evolving educational needs.

Finally, the cycle returns to training, emphasizing that professional development is not a one-off event but a continuous process, essential to sustaining curriculum innovation and school improvement. By embedding monitoring and evaluation into every stage, SMAN 2 Kotaagung has developed a resilient system that can effectively respond to both successes and setbacks in curriculum implementation.

This approach is corroborated by research suggesting that schools with strong, ongoing cycles of evaluation and improvement are better positioned to achieve high-quality learning outcomes and foster adaptive, empowered teaching communities (Utami & Ramdani, 2023).

Stakeholder Perspectives and Collaborative Culture

The successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMAN 2 Kotaagung is not only a result of effective leadership and teacher adaptation but also hinges on the meaningful engagement of all stakeholders. The cultivation of a collaborative school culture—where principals, teachers, students, and parents work together toward shared educational goals—represents a critical factor in sustaining transformative change in the learning environment (El-Haris et al., 2025).

Parental involvement at SMAN 2 Kotaagung has experienced a significant upsurge since the adoption of the Independent Curriculum. Parents are now more frequently invited to participate in school forums, parent-teacher conferences, and collaborative decision-making processes. Through these activities, parents become active partners in monitoring their children's progress, contributing ideas for school improvement, and supporting various academic and extracurricular initiatives. This participatory approach increases transparency, enhances trust, and ensures that educational programs are responsive to the community's needs (Puspita Sari & Hidayati, 2023).

Feedback collected from parent interviews highlights widespread appreciation for the more personalized learning experiences and the emphasis on student creativity and autonomy. Many parents express satisfaction with their children's newfound motivation and confidence, noting improvements not only in academic performance but also in character development and social skills. This echoes findings in the literature, which emphasize the positive impact of parental engagement on student achievement and school improvement (Yunus & Yani, 2019).

The Independent Curriculum has amplified student voice and agency within the school community. Students report feeling more empowered to express their opinions, participate in class decision-making, and engage in peer-led initiatives. The principal and teachers actively solicit student feedback through regular focus group discussions and surveys, using this input to adjust lesson content, teaching methods, and even assessment strategies. Such practices nurture a sense of ownership and belonging, and motivate students to take responsibility for their learning journey (Rahmawati & Zainuddin, 2021).

Moreover, the curriculum's flexible structure enables students to pursue independent projects and interdisciplinary studies, further supporting self-discovery and personal growth. These

opportunities help students develop skills essential for the 21st century—such as collaboration, adaptability, and problem-solving—while also fostering a school climate that celebrates diversity and creativity (Sari & Winarsih, 2020).

Within the teaching community, there is a strong ethos of collaboration and mutual support. Teachers are encouraged to share best practices, participate in peer observations, and co-develop lesson plans. The principal's facilitative leadership style empowers teachers to take initiative in proposing curricular innovations or extracurricular programs, promoting a sense of shared ownership and distributed leadership. This collegial atmosphere not only reduces resistance to change but also accelerates professional growth and innovation (S. Yuliana & Sari, 2022).

Regular professional learning communities and reflective practice sessions foster open communication and encourage teachers to address challenges collectively. As a result, the school has developed a dynamic, learning-oriented culture where experimentation is valued and continuous improvement is a shared objective (N. Pratiwi & Utami, 2022).

The principal at SMAN 2 Kotaagung acts as a catalyst for collaboration, actively building bridges among all stakeholder groups. By maintaining open lines of communication, facilitating inclusive decision-making, and providing opportunities for joint problem-solving, the principal ensures that every member of the school community has a voice in shaping educational policies and practices. This inclusive leadership approach has proven vital in creating an environment where trust, respect, and a shared vision for the future can flourish (G. Biesta, 2019).

In summary, the collaborative culture at SMAN 2 Kotaagung—driven by the engagement of parents, students, teachers, and school leaders—serves as the foundation for the school's success in implementing the Independent Curriculum. Through shared leadership, transparent communication, and mutual support, the school community is able to collectively navigate change, innovate in teaching and learning, and foster an environment that supports the holistic development of every student. This experience reinforces the broader evidence that sustainable educational transformation requires not only effective internal processes but also the active participation and commitment of all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMAN 2 Kotaagung is the result of synergistic efforts among school leadership, teachers, students, and parents. The principal's managerial ability emerged as a central factor in guiding curriculum transformation, providing visionary leadership, facilitating teacher professional development, and fostering a collaborative and innovative school culture. The adoption of structured professional development, mentoring, and continuous feedback has empowered teachers to adapt effectively to new curricular demands, while enabling students to experience increased engagement, autonomy, and improved learning outcomes.

Parental involvement and the active participation of the broader school community have further reinforced the sustainability of curriculum changes. The monitoring and evaluation system, anchored in data-driven decision making and ongoing cycles of assessment and adjustment, has ensured the curriculum remains responsive to evolving educational needs and stakeholder expectations.

Overall, the findings highlight that educational transformation through the Independent Curriculum is most effective when supported by strong managerial leadership, ongoing teacher capacity building, robust stakeholder engagement, and a culture of continuous improvement. These insights offer valuable implications for policymakers, school leaders, and educators seeking to advance curriculum reform and improve the quality of education in diverse contexts.

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