

The Role of Teacher Leaders in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum: A Case Study at SMPN 03 Soreang

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ABSTRACT

The Merdeka Curriculum introduces a paradigm shift toward learner-centered education. As the vanguard of educational transformation, Guru Penggerak face the challenge of integrating the new curriculum with established practices. This study aims to analyze the role of Guru Penggerak in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, their strategies for motivating colleagues, as well as the supporting and hindering factors. This qualitative study with a descriptive approach was conducted at SMPN 03 Soreang, Bandung Regency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five Teacher Leaders, participatory observation, and document analysis. The results indicate that Teacher Leaders serve as agents of curriculum integration, facilitators of paradigm shifts, and catalysts for professional collaboration. Effective strategies include a personalized persuasive approach, the sharing of best practices, and continuous training through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform. Key supporting factors are adaptive school leadership and budget allocation, while barriers include teacher resistance to change and limitations in technological resources. This study concludes that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum is largely determined by the capacity of Teacher Leaders to bridge policy with classroom practice through collaborative leadership.

Keywords: Teacher Leaders; Merdeka Curriculum; curriculum implementation; paradigm shift; instructional leadership.

Introduction

The curriculum operates as a foundational blueprint that directs pedagogical processes while adapting to the dynamic demands of a changing epoch (Bahri, 2011). In Indonesia, educational policy has historically been subjected to significant restructuring, culminating in the progressive launch of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Merdeka Curriculum) in 2020 (Insani, 2019; Priantini et al., 2022). The *Merdeka Belajar* (Emancipated Learning) policy paradigm was instituted to decentralize educational authority, granting institutions, educators, and students the autonomy to foster independent and creative innovation (Priantini et al., 2022). This paradigm shift emerged as a strategic response to the systemic limitations of the preceding 2013 Curriculum, which was often critiqued for its bureaucratic rigidity, excessive complexity, and structural misalignment with localized socio-educational needs (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022).

Central to the successful operationalization of this new educational ecosystem is the *Guru Penggerak* (Teacher-Leader). Officially designated as pedagogical frontrunners, these educators are mandated not merely to execute effective classroom management but to act as systemic agents of change who inspire collegial networks and the broader school community (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology [MoECRT], 2022). As Sibagariang et al. (2021) assert, the *Guru Penggerak* constitutes the primary catalyst for the *Merdeka Belajar* transformation, bearing the responsibility to orchestrate project-based pedagogy, cultivate a progressive school climate, and holistically develop students' character in alignment with the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (Pancasila Student Profile).

Despite its robust conceptual framework, the localized implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is highly complex. Substantial discrepancies persist between macro-level policy and micro-level practice, predominantly exacerbated by resource constraints and deep-seated collegial resistance to pedagogical disruption (Masau & Arismunandar, 2022). While scholarly discourse on the *Guru Penggerak* has proliferated, the literature remains largely confined to generalized leadership frameworks. Existing studies tend to be broadly descriptive

(Masau & Arismunandar, 2022; Sibagariang et al., 2021) or strictly quantitative and correlational (Sari, 2023). Consequently, a critical epistemological gap exists regarding the nuanced, on-the-ground strategies employed by these Teacher-Leaders to navigate curriculum integration—particularly within transitional environments like junior high schools still disentangling from the 2013 Curriculum.

To bridge this gap, this study employs a context-rich, single-case qualitative approach to: (1) critically analyze the integrative role of *Guru Penggerak* in harmonizing the Merdeka Curriculum with legacy systems at SMPN 03 Soreang; (2) identify the specific persuasive strategies utilized to dismantle collegial resistance and motivate peers; and (3) evaluate the structural and cultural determinants that support or hinder this pedagogical transition. Ultimately, this research provides vital empirical insights into the dialectics of teacher leadership and micro-level policy translation amidst nationwide curriculum reform.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to comprehensively examine the role of *Guru Penggerak* (Teacher-Leaders) within their natural and contextual setting (Creswell, 2014; Sugiyono, 2010). The research was conducted at SMPN 03 Soreang, Bandung Regency, a site purposively selected due to its status as an "Independent in Transition" (*Mandiri Berubah*) implementer of the Merdeka Curriculum and its cohort of five certified *Guru Penggerak*. Primary data were obtained from these five educators, selected via purposive sampling based on three explicit criteria: completion of at least one year of *Guru Penggerak* training, active involvement in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, and a minimum of five years of teaching experience. Secondary data comprised the School Operational Curriculum (KOSP) documents, visual documentation of activities, and institutional archives. Data were gathered through three primary methods: (1) semi-structured interviews utilizing a protocol derived from *Guru Penggerak* performance indicators (Widyastuti, 2022); (2) participatory observation during curriculum coordination meetings and internal training sessions; and (3) systematic documentation of school profiles, infrastructural

facilities, and activity records. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1992), encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Finally, data credibility was rigorously ensured through source triangulation (cross-verifying responses among informants) and methodological triangulation (corroborating data across interviews, observations, and documentation)."

The primary data sources were five Guru Penggerak selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: having completed at least one year of Guru Penggerak training, being actively involved in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and having at least five years of teaching experience. Secondary data were obtained from the School Operational Curriculum (KOSP) documents, photos of activities, and school archives.

Data collection methods included: (1) semi-structured interviews using a guide developed from the indicators of the Guru Penggerak role (Widyastuti, 2022); (2) participatory observation of curriculum coordination meetings and internal training sessions; and (3) documentation of school profiles, facilities and infrastructure, and activity records. Data was analyzed using the Miles & Huberman (1992) interactive model, which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (comparing interviews across informants) and methodological triangulation (combining interviews, observations, and documentation).

Results and Discussion

The Role of Teacher Leaders in Curriculum Integration

Research findings indicate that the Teacher Leaders at SMPN 03 Soreang fulfill three key roles in integrating the Merdeka Curriculum with the 2013 Curriculum. First, as facilitators of conceptual understanding, they actively bridge the epistemological gap between the two curricula. As Novi Tri Lestari explained:

"The steps taken were to identify options for implementing the independent curriculum (SMPN 03 Soreang Mandiri Berubah), then

understand the structure of the independent curriculum, understand the phases... and commit to learning through the gradual integration of the old curriculum into the independent curriculum."

This statement confirms that Guru Penggerak serves as knowledge brokers who translate abstract policies into concrete practices. This finding aligns with the concept of "learning leaders" proposed by Widyastuti (2022) but adds a dimension of integrative stages that has not been widely discussed in the previous literature.

As agents of paradigm shift, Guru Penggerak is transforming the focus of learning from teacher-centered to student-centered. Dine Nurdian, explains: "The role of a teacher-leader is to serve as a catalyst in understanding the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum with a spirit of sharing and collaboration, to manage the classroom effectively, and to help students unlock their potential... guiding them toward happiness and success."

The phrase "guiding" reflects Ki Hajar Dewantara's philosophy (the "among" system), indicating that the role of the Guru Penggerak is not merely technical but also philosophical. This reinforces Musanna's (2017) argument that the Merdeka Curriculum is, in fact, a revitalization of Ki Hajar's liberating approach to education.

Third, as catalysts for professional collaboration, Guru Penggerak foster an ecosystem of knowledge sharing. This is evident in their initiatives to activate local school learning communities and utilize the Merdeka Mengajar Platform as a virtual collaboration space. These findings support the research by Manao et al. (2022) that the Guru Penggerak program is effective in enhancing teacher quality through collaborative networks.

Strategies for Motivating and Engaging Colleagues

Four main strategies were identified in this study. The first strategy is a personalized persuasive approach based on an awareness of teachers' diverse personalities and readiness. Ida Laila Banyal stated: "Serving as a role model for example, promoting and sharing best practices, coaching, peer mentoring... using communication and persuasive approaches to inspire fellow teachers."

This approach differs from a command-and-control or top-down model. Teacher Leaders prefer coaching and peer tutoring because they are seen as better respecting the professional autonomy of their colleagues.

The second strategy is the sharing of best practices, both internally and among schools. This activity is not merely ceremonial but is

structured into a regular schedule and results in documented written materials. This aligns with the principle of the community of practice (Wenger, 1998), in which learning occurs through active participation in the community.

The third strategy is to create an environment for innovation through case studies of other schools that have successfully implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. The Teacher Leaders do not insist on a strict adoption of the curriculum but adapt it to the local context of SMPN 03 Soreang. This reflects practical intelligence in educational leadership.

The fourth strategy is to reinforce professional identity when facing resistance. When a teacher is reluctant to change, the Guru Penggerak reminds them of the four educator competencies and the relevance of the Merdeka Curriculum to the development of those competencies. This strategy is effective because it transforms resistance from an external threat into internal reflection.

Supporting and Hindering Factors

The key enabling factor is adaptive leadership on the part of the school principal. The principal not only grants permission but also actively facilitates the provision of facilities and infrastructure, allocates funds in the school budget, and establishes supportive policies. This support is critical because curriculum implementation requires structural legitimacy.

The second supporting factor is collaboration with school supervisors and curriculum coordinators, who provide technical guidance and formative assessments. Third, ongoing training from the West Java BBGP and the Merdeka Mengajar Platform equips participants with practical technical skills.

However, the study also identified three major obstacles. First, resistance to change stemming from comfort with conventional teaching methods. Second, limited technological resources, particularly unstable internet access and limited laboratory space. Third, differences in the pace of adaptation among teachers, leading to disparities in the quality of implementation across classes.

Interestingly, the Guru Penggerak at SMPN 03 Soreang overcame these obstacles through a flexible approach and pedagogical improvisation. For example, when the computer lab was inadequate, they adapted digital projects to use simpler tools while still achieving the learning objectives. This demonstrates that creativity can compensate for structural limitations.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Teacher Leaders at SMPN 03 Soreang play a strategic role as facilitators of curriculum integration, agents of paradigm shift, and catalysts for professional collaboration. Their success is determined not only by individual competence but also by a supportive ecosystem that includes adaptive school leadership, collaboration with supervisors, and access to ongoing training. Personal persuasion strategies, sharing best practices, and strengthening professional identity have proven effective in overcoming resistance from peers. The main obstacle limited technological resources can be overcome through pedagogical improvisation.

The theoretical implication of this study is the need for a curriculum implementation model that recognizes the role of middle leaders (Guru Penggerak) as a key variable that bridges macro-level policies with micro-level practices. In practical terms, this study recommends strengthening coaching-based training programs, improving school digital infrastructure, and developing a recognition system for Guru Penggerak. Further research at various levels and in different regions is needed to test the generalizability of these findings.

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