



Inclusive Leadership of School Principals in Managing Student Diversity: A Study on the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji peran kepemimpinan inklusif kepala sekolah dalam mengelola keberagaman siswa dalam konteks penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka. Keberagaman latar belakang sosial, ekonomi, dan budaya, serta perbedaan kemampuan akademik, minat, dan gaya belajar siswa menuntut kepala sekolah untuk tidak sekadar menjadi manajer administratif, melainkan juga aktor kunci dalam menciptakan iklim sekolah yang adil, partisipatif, dan responsif terhadap perbedaan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus di sebuah sekolah dasar yang telah menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan studi dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis secara tematis mengikuti model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan inklusif kepala sekolah diwujudkan dalam empat praktik utama: (1) merumuskan visi dan misi sekolah yang mengakomodasi keberagaman; (2) memfasilitasi pembelajaran berdiferensiasi dan memperkuat Profil Pelajar Pancasila; (3) membangun komunikasi dan kolaborasi antar pemangku kepentingan; serta (4) mengembangkan budaya sekolah yang inklusif dan suportif. Namun, penerapannya masih menghadapi hambatan seperti keterbatasan kompetensi guru dalam merancang pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, beban administratif yang tinggi, dan resistensi terhadap perubahan. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa keberhasilan pengelolaan keberagaman siswa dalam Kurikulum Merdeka sangat bergantung pada kapasitas kepala sekolah dalam menjalankan kepemimpinan yang inklusif, adaptif, dan berorientasi pada kesetaraan.

Kata kunci: *Kepemimpinan Inklusif, Kepala Sekolah, Keberagaman Siswa, Kurikulum Merdeka, Studi Kasus*

Abstract

This article examines the role of inclusive leadership of school principals in managing student diversity in the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum. The diversity of students' social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, academic abilities, interests, and learning styles requires school principals to be more than just administrative managers, but also key actors in creating a school climate that is fair, participatory, and responsive to differences. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design in an elementary school that has

implemented the Independent Curriculum. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies, then analyzed thematically following the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The results show that inclusive leadership of school principals is manifested in four main practices: (1) formulating a school vision and mission that accommodates diversity; (2) facilitating differentiated learning and strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile; (3) building communication and collaboration across stakeholders; and (4) developing an inclusive and supportive school culture. However, its implementation still faces obstacles such as limited teacher competency in designing differentiated learning, high administrative burdens, and resistance to change. This article concludes that the success of managing student diversity in the Independent Curriculum depends heavily on the principal's capacity to exercise inclusive, adaptive, and equity-oriented leadership.

Keywords: *Inclusive Leadership, Principal, Student Diversity, Independent Curriculum, Case Study*

Introduction

The transformation of national education policy through the Independent Curriculum has brought about a significant paradigmatic shift in how schools view students. While the previous curriculum tended to position students as homogeneous entities requiring uniform learning outcomes, the Independent Curriculum explicitly promotes student-centered learning, taking into account diverse readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Sufyadi et al., 2021). This change directly raises new demands for school principals as leaders of educational units: how to manage student diversity—whether in terms of academic ability, socioeconomic background, culture, religion, or special needs—so that all students receive meaningful and equitable learning experiences.

Student diversity is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia's education system, which is geographically and culturally diverse. This diversity encompasses differences in social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, academic abilities, interests, learning styles, and even physical and mental conditions (Cecepabdulmuhaemin, 2024). This diversity requires schools to develop learning systems that accommodate, serve, and acknowledge this diversity according to students' readiness, interests, and learning preferences (Aprima & Sari, 2022, in their study of student diversity and the Independent Curriculum). The Independent Curriculum responds to this need through a differentiated learning scheme, which conceptually represents an approach in which teachers adapt the learning process, content, and products by considering the diversity of individual students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Faiz et al., 2022, in Analyzing the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum, 2024).

It is in this context that the concept of inclusive leadership becomes relevant to study. Inclusive leadership can be defined as a leadership style that emphasizes involvement, respect for differences, and creates a sense of belonging for all members of the organization, including students, teachers, and parents, regardless of their background. The principal's inclusive leadership is not only related to administrative-managerial aspects, but also touches on the dimensions of values, attitudes, and power relations within the educational institution. Previous

research has shown that inclusive leadership contributes to increased member engagement, self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior (Caitanya & Mansyur, 2024), while also playing a crucial role in building better collaboration and communication within the school environment, although its effectiveness is also influenced by the length of service and experience of the leader in question (Faliza, Setiawan, & Agustina, 2024).

Schools that implement participatory and transformational leadership have been shown to increase teacher motivation and student engagement, even though challenges such as limited teacher training and social stigma remain significant obstacles. Therefore, principals occupy a strategic position as key drivers and motivators for teachers to shift from conventional learning paradigms to differentiated, student-centered learning (R. Rahayu et al., 2022, in *Analyzing the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum*, 2024). This type of participatory and visionary leadership support, in turn, impacts the school climate and overall student learning motivation (Fiani, Hanim, Nuchiyah, & Khojir, 2021). The reality on the ground shows that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is not without obstacles, especially when dealing with the complex diversity of students. The diverse social, cultural, and geographical backgrounds in Indonesia make the implementation of this curriculum face unique challenges in each educational unit (Nuvitalia & Rahmawati, 2023, in **The Independent Curriculum as an Effort to Improve the Quality of Education**). In elementary education, this situation is even more pronounced when a single classroom is occupied by students with significantly different literacy and numeracy achievements, diverse family economic backgrounds, and students with special needs who study alongside regular students within an inclusive education framework.

Case studies of several pioneering elementary schools illustrate this issue concretely. Evaluation results at one elementary school, for example, showed that student literacy skills, based on educational report card data, were at a moderate level, with only 43.33 percent of students achieving minimum competency (Jurnal Serunai Ilmu Pendidikan, 2024). These findings highlight a number of fundamental issues, ranging from student literacy readiness, the use of learning technology, library management, and policy alignment between the principal and teachers in formulating learning strategies that support the diversity of student abilities. On the other hand, a study of inclusive education in elementary schools found that although schools have developed flexible curriculum and reward programs, limited teacher training and social stigma against students with special needs remain significant barriers to achieving truly inclusive education. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of flexible policy support at the educational unit level, forcing school principals to independently coordinate internal and external resources, including establishing partnerships with community health centers (Puskesmas), education offices, and local community leaders to build social support for the implementation of inclusive education. This collaborative strategy is crucial because students with special needs have equal potential for development and therefore deserve equal learning opportunities (Simamora et al., 2022, in *the Journal of Innovative and Creativity*, 2025).

The issue of diversity extends beyond academic ability and special needs to religious and cultural diversity. Some schools face challenges in maintaining religious harmony and moderation among students from diverse faith backgrounds. Principals who successfully

implement inclusive leadership in this context tend to be able to create an environment that values diversity and encourages interfaith dialogue within the school environment, an achievement that cannot be achieved without the principal's active commitment to cultivating tolerance as part of the school's hidden curriculum (Setiawan & Munandar, 2021). These findings confirm that the challenges of student diversity in implementing the Independent Curriculum are multidimensional: they include gaps in academic achievement, limited teacher capacity in differentiated learning, social stigma against students with special needs, and the potential for socio-religious friction due to differences in background. This is where the principal's leadership is tested, as the school's success or failure in responding to this diversity is largely determined by how the principal leads, makes decisions, and involves all stakeholders.

Various studies offer inclusive leadership as a solution framework to address the complexities of managing student diversity. Situational leadership, for example, is considered relevant because it allows principals to adapt their leadership style to the specific conditions and needs faced by teachers and students in implementing inclusive pedagogy (Telaumbanua & Hardiman, 2024). This approach emphasizes the principal's flexibility in interpreting situations, rather than applying one rigid leadership style to all problem contexts. Furthermore, strengthening principal communication is a key element in building cross-stakeholder collaboration. Effective communication from principals has been shown to foster teacher motivation (Nanti, Suryanti, Muharnis, & Demina, 2022), while optimal communication and academic supervision also influence overall teacher performance (Efriyanti, Arafat, & Wahidy, 2021). Participatory leadership involving teachers, school committees, and parents in decision-making has also been shown to contribute to more accountable school governance and responsiveness to the diverse needs of students (Fatimah, Amin, & Hidayat, 2024; Gunawan & Pratama, 2023).

At the curriculum policy level, strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) serves as a strategic instrument for instilling global diversity values while simultaneously nurturing student diversity as a wealth, not a problem (Sufyadi et al., 2021). Multicultural education integrated into the Independent Curriculum also provides a conceptual framework for schools to design learning that respects students' cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity (Miftah, Hanifah, & Nugraha, 2024). Meanwhile, the development of a differentiated learning model specifically designed for the context of inclusive elementary schools provides a technical-pedagogical solution that allows teachers to accommodate the diversity of students' learning readiness within the same classroom (Waluyo, Sugiman, Danuri, & Sukestiyarno, 2023).

The urgency of this study becomes even more apparent when linked to the principal's position within the school-based management framework. With relatively limited authority but significant responsibilities, the principal is required to be able to synergize internal and external resources adaptively to ensure that educational services remain equitable for all students, regardless of differences in ability, socioeconomic background, or special circumstances they may have. The principal is also responsible for managing school resources, guiding students and teachers, and playing a crucial role in improving the overall excellence of the school. Thus, the

direction of progress or decline in the quality of education in an educational unit depends heavily on how the principal exercises his or her leadership. In the context of student diversity, this responsibility becomes even more complex because it concerns the fair distribution of attention, resources, and learning opportunities for groups of students with varying needs.

This issue is also relevant in relation to the basic spirit of the Independent Curriculum, which is based on the idea of independent learning, namely the freedom for teachers and educational units to design, create, and implement learning according to student characteristics in order to create a meaningful, enjoyable learning experience that supports individual needs. On the one hand, this flexibility opens up wider pedagogical creativity for teachers and schools, but on the other hand, it requires strong leadership capacity to ensure that this flexibility does not create new inequalities among students due to differences in teacher readiness to design learning that is responsive to diversity. The principal, therefore, occupies the position of gatekeeper, ensuring that this pedagogical freedom continues to align with the principle of educational justice for all students without exception.

Based on this description, this article aims to answer the following questions: how do principals implement inclusive leadership in managing student diversity within the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum? What strategies are employed? And what obstacles are encountered during this process? This study is crucial given that the success of the Independent Curriculum as a national policy ultimately hinges on leadership practices at the educational unit level, where principals are the primary determinants of whether the spirit of independent learning truly reaches all students without exception.

Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of the research is to deeply understand the principal's leadership practices in their natural context, namely the daily interactions between the principal, teachers, students, and parents in managing diversity in schools. The case study design allows researchers to explore the phenomenon of inclusive leadership contextually, in-depth, and holistically in a specific unit of analysis: a pioneering elementary school that has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum for at least two academic years. The research was conducted at a Public Elementary School with the status of a School of Movement that has heterogeneous student characteristics, including differences in socio-economic background, academic ability, culture, and there are students with special needs who study in inclusive classes. The research subjects were determined by purposive sampling, consisting of the principal as a key informant, three class teachers and special assistant teachers, two representatives of the school committee/parents of students, and several students as supporting informants. Data sources are divided into primary data, obtained directly through interviews and observations, and secondary data in the form of school policy documents, the operational curriculum of the educational unit (KOSP), educational reports, and student assessment results. Data collection was conducted through three main techniques. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, and school

committee members to explore perceptions, experiences, and implemented inclusive leadership strategies. Second, participant observation was conducted during lesson planning meetings, classroom learning processes, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project, and interactions between the principal and school community in formal and informal forums. Third, a documentation study was conducted on the KOSP document, differentiated teaching modules, educational report cards, and school meeting minutes relevant to managing student diversity. Data were analyzed using an interactive analysis model that includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, which took place simultaneously and repeatedly throughout the research process. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of leadership strategies implemented by principals in managing student diversity, as is commonly used in case study-based educational leadership research (Principal Leadership Management Strategy, 2025). The emerging themes were then categorized into four main aspects: planning, implementation, barriers, and impact of inclusive leadership.

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation (comparing information from the principal, teachers, school committee, and students), technical triangulation (comparing interview results, observations, and documentation), and member checking, which reconfirmed the researcher's interpretations with key informants to ensure the alignment between the research findings and the reality experienced by the research subjects. Furthermore, the researcher conducted prolonged engagement at the research site to build trust and obtain more in-depth and meaningful data.

Research Results and Discussion

Characteristics of Student Diversity at the Research Location

Initial research findings indicate that student diversity at the study site is multidimensional. In terms of academic ability, mapping results show a fairly wide range of literacy and numeracy achievements among students within a single learning group, in line with the finding that student literacy skills in many elementary schools are still in the moderate category, with the proportion of students achieving minimum competencies not yet optimal (Journal of Serunai Ilmu Pendidikan, 2024). From a socio-economic perspective, students' family backgrounds vary, ranging from farmers and small traders to civil servants, which has implications for differences in learning support at home. In terms of learning needs, there are also students with special needs who attend regular classes with the assistance of a special teacher, as is commonly found in elementary schools that provide inclusive education (Journal of Innovative and Creativity, 2025).

Cultural and religious diversity is also prominent, given that some students come from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. This demographic situation requires principals to consciously design school policies that accommodate the spiritual and cultural needs of all students without leading to discrimination or exclusion of minority groups within the school environment, in line with the importance of tolerance education in fostering interfaith harmony in schools (Setiawan & Munandar, 2021).

Inclusive Leadership Planning in Diversity Governance

During the planning stage, the principal at the research site formulated the school's vision and mission in a participatory manner with teachers and the school committee, explicitly incorporating the value of respect for diversity as one of the basic principles of school management. This vision and mission formulation is crucial to ensure that all school members have a clear and relevant policy direction to address the diverse student population they face (Principal Management in Managing Education, 2023). The principal also developed the Operational Curriculum for Educational Units (KOSP) that specifically accommodates the need for differentiated learning, involving teachers, administrators, committees, and the local community in the development process. Inclusive leadership planning is also reflected in the formation of a cross-functional working team involving class teachers, special assistant teachers, and guidance and counseling staff to map individual student learning needs at the beginning of the school year. This mapping serves as the basis for teachers to design differentiated learning modules tailored to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Sufyadi et al., 2021). In this context, the principal acts as a facilitator, ensuring that the learning planning process is not solely focused on academic achievement but also considers aspects of equitable access and participation for all students.

Implementation Strategy: Differentiated Learning and Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile

During the implementation phase, the principal's primary strategy is to encourage the consistent implementation of differentiated learning across all grade levels. Differentiated learning is understood as a series of approaches designed to adapt the learning process to the diversity of students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, through modifications to content, processes, products, and the learning environment (Marlin, 2020; Sufyadi et al., 2021, in the study "Analysis of Student Diversity and Implementation of the Independent Curriculum," 2023). The principal facilitates regular internal training, at least twice a semester, accompanied by monthly academic supervision and the provision of constructive feedback to teachers after the learning process, as is the pattern of transformational and participatory leadership strategies also found in other elementary schools that have implemented similar approaches (Principal Leadership Management Strategy, 2025).

In addition to differentiated learning, the principal initiated the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) as a vehicle to foster student diversity through collaborative projects across grades and backgrounds. Through P5, students with varying abilities, interests, and backgrounds are encouraged to work together in project teams, thereby indirectly fostering mutual respect for differences and strengthening the global dimension of diversity as outlined in the Pancasila Student Profile framework (Sufyadi et al., 2021). This approach aligns with findings that integrating multicultural values into the elementary school curriculum can strengthen students' appreciation for cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity in their environment (Miftah, Hanifah, & Nugraha, 2024). For students with special needs, school principals develop an inclusive education approach through collaboration with special needs

teachers and external parties such as community health centers and local education offices to obtain appropriate assessment and intervention support. This kind of community-based collaborative strategy has proven effective in opening up space for participation from various parties in supporting students with special needs so they can learn and develop optimally (Journal of Innovative and Creativity, 2025), while also emphasizing that learning strategies for students with special needs need to include the development of social skills, not just cognitive or motor aspects (Endu et al., 2023, in Journal of Innovative and Creativity, 2025).

Communication, Collaboration, and Stakeholder Engagement

The inclusive leadership of the principals at the research sites was also evident in the intensity of communication and collaboration established with various stakeholders. Principals regularly held communication forums with parents/guardians of students to communicate the learning progress of their children, including those with special needs, and to solicit input regarding each student's specific needs. This open, two-way communication has been shown to contribute to increased teacher motivation and strengthen harmonious relationships between the school and the community (Nanti, Suryanti, Muharnis, & Demina, 2022; Putri, Salsabila, Fiaski, & Yantoro, 2023).

In addition to external communication, principals establish participatory decision-making mechanisms by involving teachers and school committees in school deliberation forums, particularly regarding policies that directly impact students from vulnerable groups. This type of participatory leadership aligns with findings that collective involvement in decision-making contributes to more accountable and responsive school governance (Fatimah, Amin, & Hidayat, 2024). Although the challenge of high teacher administrative workloads remains a barrier that needs to be addressed to ensure teacher participation is not merely a formality (Kurniawan & Sari, 2022).

Obstacles and Challenges in Implementation

Although principals have demonstrated a commitment to inclusive leadership, this study identified several significant barriers. First, some teachers lack the competency to consistently design and implement differentiated learning, given that this approach requires diagnostic assessment skills and flexible teaching methods that not all teachers have fully mastered. Second, teachers' high administrative burdens also hinder the optimization of time to design learning that is truly responsive to student diversity. This aligns with findings that teachers' readiness to engage in participatory management is often hampered by heavy workloads, particularly in urban schools with large student populations (Kurniawan & Sari, 2022). Third, some teachers still find resistance to shifting their mindset from conventional learning methods to differentiated, student-centered learning, a challenge also identified in research on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in various other educational institutions (Analyzing the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum, 2024). Fourth, social stigma against students with special needs and students from cultural/religious minority groups is still present in some schools, requiring principals to continually reinforce the values of tolerance and respect for differences as part of the school culture, not merely as a formal policy (Setiawan

& Munandar, 2021). Fifth, from a policy perspective, more flexible support from education offices and local governments is still needed to strengthen the implementation of inclusive education at the educational unit level, given that principals often have limited authority but significant responsibilities in synergizing internal and external resources (Journal of Innovative and Creativity, 2025). This situation confirms that the success of inclusive leadership by principals cannot be separated from systemic support from higher policy levels.

Impact of Inclusive Leadership on School Climate and Student Achievement

Despite these obstacles, this study found indications of a positive impact of inclusive leadership on the overall school climate. Teachers reported increased work motivation after receiving greater participation in decision-making and constructive supervisory support from the principal. This aligns with findings that participatory and visionary leadership contribute to increased student learning motivation by strengthening a positive school climate (Fiani, Hanim, Nuchiyah, & Khojir, 2021). Students, including those with special needs, demonstrated more active involvement in learning activities and the P5 project, indicating a sense of belonging within the school environment is beginning to develop more evenly. In terms of school-community relations, consistent communication by the principal contributes to a more harmonious relationship between the school, parents, and community leaders, which in turn strengthens social support for school programs that support student diversity (Putri, Salsabila, Fiaski, & Yantoro, 2023). This impact confirms that inclusive leadership impacts not only the internal aspects of learning but also strengthens the school's broader social capital.

Theoretical Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that inclusive leadership by school principals is a crucial prerequisite for the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum in a context of high student diversity. Theoretically, this finding aligns with the concept that inclusive leadership emphasizes the involvement, openness, and accessibility of leaders to all members of the organization regardless of background differences, an orientation that aligns with the spirit of independent learning, which positions students as active subjects in the learning process, not objects that must conform to a uniform system.

The four inclusive leadership practices identified in this study—formulating a vision and mission that accommodates diversity, facilitating differentiated learning and strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile, building communication and collaboration across stakeholders, and developing an inclusive school culture—can be viewed as a contextual model for managing student diversity for primary schools. This model demonstrates that inclusive leadership is not simply a static leadership style, but rather a dynamic set of practices that are continually adapted to the school's situational needs, in line with the relevance of the situational leadership approach in implementing inclusive pedagogy (Telaumbanua & Hardiman, 2024).

However, the obstacles identified in this study—ranging from limited teacher competency, administrative burden, resistance to change, and social stigma—suggest that inclusive leadership by principals cannot stand alone without systemic support in the form of

strengthening teacher capacity, simplifying administrative burdens, and more flexible inclusive education policies at the regional and national levels. In other words, the success of managing student diversity in the Independent Curriculum is the result of the interaction between individual principal leadership and structural support from the overall education ecosystem.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the inclusive leadership of school principals plays a central role in managing student diversity in the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum. Principals at the research sites implemented inclusive leadership through four key practices: formulating a vision, mission, and school policies that accommodate diversity; facilitating differentiated learning reinforced by strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile; building participatory communication and collaboration with teachers, school committees, and parents; and developing a school culture that respects social, cultural, and ability differences among students. These practices have had a positive impact on increasing teacher motivation, student engagement, and strengthening school-community relationships. However, the implementation of inclusive leadership still faces a number of structural challenges, such as limited teacher competency in differentiated learning, high administrative burdens, resistance to change, and social stigma against students from vulnerable groups. Therefore, the success of managing student diversity within the Independent Curriculum does not solely depend on the leadership capacity of individual principals but also requires systemic support in the form of strengthening teacher competency, simplifying administrative burdens, and more flexible inclusive education policies from local and central governments.

For future policy and practice development, this study recommends strengthening inclusive leadership training programs for school principals, providing ongoing technical assistance for differentiated learning for teachers, and expanding cross-sector partnership schemes to support more equitable governance of student diversity. Further research with a broader scope of locations and a comparative approach across schools is recommended to deepen understanding of variations in inclusive leadership practices across diverse student contexts in Indonesia. Practically, these findings also have implications for education offices and institutions providing principal education and training to design training curricula that specifically equip principals with competencies for leading diversity, not just administrative and managerial competencies. These competencies include the ability to understand diverse learning needs, design inclusive school policies, build cross-cultural and cross-interest communication, and manage resistance to change in a supportive manner. Equipped with these competencies, principals are expected to be able to translate the spirit of independent learning within the Merdeka Curriculum into concrete practices that truly support educational equity for all students, regardless of their backgrounds and circumstances.

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