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Teachers' Perceptions of the Principal's Role as a Driver of Educational Quality in the Merdeka Belajar Era

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of education policy through Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) positions schools as adaptive learning ecosystems oriented toward sustainable quality. This study aims to examine teachers' perceptions of the principal's role as a driver of educational quality in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar and to identify supporting and inhibiting factors affecting this role. The study used a qualitative descriptive approach supported by simple quantitative data. The study subjects consisted of 17 teachers and one principal at an elementary school implementing Merdeka Belajar. Data were collected through a 4-point Likert-scale questionnaire and written interviews, then analyzed using mean scores, percentage of maximum scores, category interpretation, and thematic analysis. The quantitative results showed an overall mean score of 3.32 out of 4 (82.9%), indicating positive teacher perceptions. The highest score was obtained for professional development support ($M = 3.51$; 87.8%), followed by support for Merdeka Belajar implementation ($M = 3.47$; 86.8%), instructional leadership ($M = 3.42$; 85.5%), and school climate and culture ($M = 3.28$; 82.0%). However, collaboration among teachers ($M = 3.18$; 79.5%) and transparency of programs ($M = 3.05$; 76.3%) were comparatively lower, indicating areas that require strengthening. These findings emphasize that consistent learning-oriented leadership, supported by collaboration and transparent school governance, is essential for sustainable educational quality.

1. Introduction

The transformation of education policy in Indonesia through the Merdeka Belajar program marks a significant paradigm shift in educational delivery practices. Schools are no longer positioned solely as curriculum implementers, but as adaptive, student-centered learning ecosystems oriented toward continuous quality improvement. Within this framework, Merdeka Belajar is understood as an effort to create a more humane, flexible learning climate that provides positive learning

experiences for all school members. Therefore, learning activities are no longer viewed as a burden but as a meaningful process (Mukhlisin et al., 2024).

At the educational unit level, the success of Merdeka Belajar implementation is greatly influenced by the quality of the principal's leadership. Principals are not only tasked with managing administration but also directing a quality vision, encouraging teacher collaboration, and ensuring effective and sustainable academic supervision. Instructional leadership practices have been shown to be closely linked to improving learning quality by strengthening teacher performance and the school climate (Nellitawati et al., 2024). In the context of constantly changing policies, principals are required to have a strong orientation toward core learning areas, such as reflection on practice, learning differentiation, formative assessment, and ongoing professional development, which require consistent leadership support.

International literature supports these findings. In general, the influence of school leadership on learning outcomes is indirect and mediated by factors such as teacher professional practice, collaboration, and school climate. Various leadership models, including instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership, contribute to improved teacher performance, which ultimately impacts student learning outcomes (Papadakis, Kanadlı, et al., 2024). Within the leadership for learning framework, leadership for learning encompasses the provision of resources, training, feedback, and role modeling, enabling the principal to serve as a catalyst, creating conditions for teachers to teach optimally. Therefore, the quality of education depends not solely on curriculum documents but also on how leadership drives the learning support system.

However, improving school quality is determined not only by the programs and policies implemented by the principal, but also by how these actions are perceived by teachers, the primary implementers of learning. Teacher perceptions can influence policy acceptance, commitment to quality programs, and readiness to collaborate. Perception studies are important because they can reveal gaps between leadership design and actual experiences in the field, particularly during policy transition periods such as Merdeka Belajar and the Merdeka Curriculum. Furthermore, most previous research has focused on describing program implementation or the administrative role of principals, resulting in relatively limited studies specifically capturing teacher perceptions of principals as drivers of quality.

In the context of national education development, the policy direction toward Indonesia's Vision 2045 demands the development of superior, innovative, and competitive human resources. This goal can only be achieved if schools develop quality systematically, encompassing a learning culture, teacher professionalism, learning innovation, and data-driven governance. A principal capable of acting as a "quality driver" is a strategic factor in ensuring that Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) is not merely a policy slogan but is implemented in daily learning practices and school culture. Therefore, understanding how teachers perceive the role of the principal provides crucial information for improving policies and leadership practices in schools.

Ni'am and Istanto (2026) examined the religious democratic leadership style of school principals in improving educational quality, indicating that principal leadership is closely related to the development of a better school environment and quality-oriented management. Istiqomah et al. (2026) also found that principals' instructional leadership, work motivation, and school culture are important factors influencing elementary school teachers' performance. Similarly, Paramita et al. (2026) highlighted that instructional leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism have a significant role in strengthening teacher performance in junior high schools. In relation to school management, Wahyuningsih et al. (2026) discussed knowledge transfer-based school management as a model for improving learning quality in elementary schools. Furthermore, Awari et al. (2026) showed that principals' managerial competence and infrastructure influence teacher performance in public junior high schools. These studies show that educational quality is strongly connected to principal leadership, teacher professionalism, school culture, and the availability of supporting resources (Awari et al., 2026; Istiqomah et al., 2026; Ni'am & Istanto, 2026; Paramita et al., 2026; Wahyuningsih et al., 2026). Therefore, examining teachers' perceptions of the principal's role as a driver of educational quality in the Merdeka Belajar era is relevant and necessary to enrich the discussion on school leadership and quality improvement.

Based on this description, this study aims to examine teachers' perceptions in depth of the principal's role as a driver of educational quality in the context of Merdeka Belajar. Specifically, this study focuses on: (1) how teachers perceive the principal's role in driving improvements in learning quality, and (2) the supporting and inhibiting factors that influence the effectiveness of this role. Placing the research objectives at the end of the introduction is intended to provide clarity in the research direction and serve as a link to the explanation of the methods used in this study.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach supported by simple quantitative data. The approach was selected because the study aimed to describe teachers' perceptions of the principal's role as a driver of educational quality in the context of Merdeka Belajar, while also presenting measurable tendencies from questionnaire responses. The qualitative data were used to obtain contextual explanations of teachers' experiences, whereas the quantitative data were used to summarize perception scores in a clear and measurable form. The study was conducted at an elementary school that had implemented the Merdeka Belajar policy. The research participants consisted of 17 teachers as the main respondents and one principal as a supporting informant. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The selection criteria for teachers were: they were active teachers at the school, involved in the implementation of learning activities, had experience with school quality improvement programs, and were willing to participate in the study. The principal was involved to provide supporting information and to strengthen source triangulation.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study consisted of a teacher perception questionnaire and a written interview guide. The questionnaire was designed to measure teachers' perceptions of the principal's role in driving educational quality. It covered several aspects, namely instructional leadership, academic supervision, professional development support, school climate, teacher collaboration, program transparency, and support for the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. The questionnaire used a 4-point Likert scale. The response options were: 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, and 4 = very good. A 4-point scale was used to avoid neutral responses and to encourage respondents to provide a clear assessment of each statement. The questionnaire was distributed to 17 teachers, and the scores from each item were used to calculate the mean score for each aspect of leadership.

The written interview guide was used to obtain deeper information related to the questionnaire results. The interview questions focused on teachers' experiences regarding the principal's leadership practices, forms of support provided by the principal, factors that supported quality improvement, and obstacles encountered in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. A written interview was also conducted with the principal to obtain supporting information and to confirm the teachers' responses.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher prepared the questionnaire and written interview guide based on the focus of the study. Second, the researcher obtained permission from the school and explained the purpose of the study to the participants. The participants were informed that their responses would be used only for research purposes and that their identities would be kept confidential. Third, the questionnaire was distributed to 17 teachers. Each teacher completed the questionnaire by selecting one of the four response options for each statement. The completed questionnaires were then collected and checked to ensure that all items had been answered properly. Fourth, written interviews were conducted with selected teachers to obtain more detailed explanations of their perceptions. The interview responses were used to clarify and enrich the questionnaire findings. In addition, the principal was also asked to provide written responses as a supporting data source. The principal's responses were used to compare and confirm the information obtained from teachers. This process was conducted as a form of source triangulation.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The analysis was conducted by calculating the total score, mean score, and percentage score for each aspect of the principal's leadership. The mean score was calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Mean} = \text{Total score} / \text{Number of respondents}$$

After the mean score was obtained, it was converted into a percentage of the maximum score using the following formula:

$$\text{Percentage} = (\text{Mean score} / 4) \times 100\%$$

To provide a clear basis for classifying teachers' questionnaire responses, the mean scores were interpreted using four score ranges, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria for interpreting Likert-scale mean scores

Mean Score Range	Category
3.26 - 4.00	Very Good
2.51 - 3.25	Good
1.76 - 2.50	Fair
1.00 - 1.75	Poor

These criteria were used to classify teachers' perceptions of each leadership aspect. For example, if an aspect obtained a mean score of 3.42, it was categorized as very good because it fell within the range of 3.26-4.00. The percentage score was used to show how close the mean score was to the maximum possible score. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted through several steps. First, the researcher read all written interview responses carefully. Second, recurring statements related to principal leadership, teacher support, collaboration, transparency, school climate, and obstacles were identified. Third, similar statements were grouped into themes. Fourth, the themes were compared with the questionnaire results to determine whether the qualitative findings supported, clarified, or expanded the quantitative trends. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation by comparing data from teacher questionnaires, teacher interviews, and the principal's interview. Ethical principles were also applied by obtaining participant consent, maintaining the confidentiality of participants' identities, and ensuring that the data were used only for research purposes.

3. Results and Discussion

Teachers' Perceptions of Principals as Drivers of School Quality

The questionnaire results indicate that teachers' perceptions of the principal's role as a driver of educational quality tend to be positive and measurable. Across the four main leadership aspects, the average mean score was 3.42 out of 4, equivalent to 85.5% of the maximum score. This result places teachers' perceptions in the very good category and indicates that the principal's leadership was perceived as strongly supportive of school quality improvement. The detailed results for each leadership aspect are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Teachers' Perceptions of Principal Leadership as a Quality Driver

Aspect of Leadership	Mean Score	Category
Instructional leadership	3.42	Very Good
Professional development support	3.51	Very Good
School climate and culture	3.28	Very Good
Support for Merdeka Belajar implementation	3.47	Very Good

(Scale 1–4)

The findings in Table 2 indicate that principal support for teacher professional development received the highest rating ($M = 3.51$; 87.8%), followed by support for Merdeka Belajar implementation ($M = 3.47$; 86.8%) and instructional leadership ($M = 3.42$; 85.5%). These results confirm that teachers most strongly perceive the principal's role when leadership directly impacts learning practices and strengthens professional capacity. This finding is consistent with the instructional leadership framework, which emphasizes the principal's role in defining learning goals, managing instructional programs, and developing a positive school learning climate (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). In the Indonesian Merdeka Belajar context, the result also supports evidence that instructional leadership contributes to teacher performance through teacher self-efficacy (Elfira et al., 2024).

Key Leadership Practices Supporting Quality Improvement

Further findings from teacher interviews confirmed the quantitative results. To clarify the concrete leadership actions most frequently perceived by teachers, the interview findings were summarized into several key leadership practices, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Key Leadership Practices Perceived by Teachers

Leadership Practice	Description from Teachers
Professional development facilitation	Training, mentoring, teacher learning communities
Instructional supervision	Classroom observation and feedback
Learning innovation support	Flexibility in teaching strategies
Motivational leadership	Encouragement and recognition

These findings indicate that teachers perceive the principal as a driver of quality when leadership is manifested in concrete actions, such as facilitating training and providing space for innovation. From a how perspective, these practices build teachers' sense of security and confidence to experiment with more student-centered learning approaches. From a why perspective, direct support for teaching practices makes teachers more prepared and motivated to consistently implement Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn). This finding is in line with Liu et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of professional learning communities in connecting professional development with instructional integration, and with Gümüş and Bellibaş (2025), who highlighted the relationship between instructional leadership, teacher self-efficacy, and job satisfaction.

School Climate and Collaborative Culture

The questionnaire also measured teachers' perceptions of school climate and collaboration. The results show that communication, collaboration among teachers, and program transparency were perceived positively, although collaboration and transparency still received lower scores than the other aspects. The detailed results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Perceptions of School Climate and Collaboration

Aspect	Mean Score	Interpretation
Communication	3.30	Very Good
Collaboration among teachers	3.18	Good
Transparency of programs	3.05	Moderate

Although generally in the good to very good categories, Table 4 shows that collaboration among teachers ($M = 3.18$; 79.5%) and transparency of programs ($M = 3.05$; 76.3%) were the lowest-scoring aspects. This indicates that a quality culture has been established, but it is not yet fully supported by systematic collaboration mechanisms and transparent follow-up. Analytically, this confirms that instructional leadership will be more effective when it is supported by distributed leadership and professional collaboration. Lin (2022) showed that teacher autonomy and professional collaboration mediate the relationship between distributed leadership and teacher innovativeness, while Cansoy et al. (2022) found that collective teacher efficacy mediates the relationship between instructional leadership and teacher commitment. Therefore, strengthening reflective meetings, professional learning communities, and transparent program evaluation is essential to transform positive perceptions into a sustainable quality culture.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Driving School Quality

Interviews with teachers and the principal identified several factors that supported and inhibited the principal's role in driving school quality. To provide a clearer overview, these factors are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Quality-Driven Leadership

Factors	Description
Supporting factors	Teacher commitment, open communication, supportive school culture
Inhibiting factors	Limited facilities, administrative workload, parental involvement

These findings indicate that the effectiveness of principal leadership is significantly influenced by the school ecosystem. From a "why" perspective, limited resources and administrative burdens limit the principal's time and energy to provide learning support. This interpretation is consistent with OECD (2021), which emphasizes that non-teaching and administrative tasks can reduce the time available for core instructional activities. From a "how" perspective, communication support and the commitment of the school community serve as social capital, enabling the principal

to maintain quality despite limited resources. In addition, parental involvement is important because school leaders play a significant role in maintaining and improving parent participation in school programs (Ginanto et al., 2024).

Principal's Perspective and Synthesis of Findings

The principal's interview validated the teachers' findings and confirmed the adaptive strategies implemented, such as program prioritization, resource optimization, and personal outreach to teachers and parents. The overall synthesis of these findings indicates that the principal's role as a driver of quality is most effective when leadership is focused on learning, supported by a collaborative culture, and balanced with adaptive strategies to address structural limitations. Thus, the contribution of this study lies in showing that teachers' perceptions of principal leadership are not only positive, but also differentiated across leadership dimensions: professional development and Merdeka Belajar support are strong, whereas collaboration and transparency remain key areas for improvement.

The Principal's Role as a Driver of Educational Quality

The findings of this study indicate that teachers perceive the principal's role as a driver of educational quality as being in the good to very good category, with an overall mean score of 3.32 out of 4 (82.9%) across all measured aspects. This perception indicates that principal leadership has moved beyond administrative functions and begun to focus on improving the quality of learning, in line with the view that instructional leadership is a key determinant of school quality improvement because it influences teachers' pedagogical practices and school learning climate (Hallinger & Wang, 2015).

In the context of education reform, learning-oriented leadership serves as a link between educational policy and classroom practice. The findings of this study reinforce this view, as teachers perceive principal support as a crucial factor in translating the Merdeka Belajar policy into more flexible and student-centered learning practices. This is consistent with Elfira et al. (2024), who found that principal instructional leadership in the Indonesian Merdeka Belajar context has significant direct and indirect relationships with teacher performance through teacher self-efficacy. A meta-analytic study shows that leadership for learning can influence student achievement through the mediation of teacher performance. This finding is relevant to the present results, which show that teachers perceive the principal's leadership as a key driving factor for improving the quality of learning (Papadakis et al., 2024).

Principal Support for Teacher Professional Development

Research results indicate that the principal's support for teacher professional development is the most prominent aspect perceived by teachers. This support facilitates teacher competency improvement through ongoing training and professional learning communities, thereby contributing to improved teaching quality and teacher readiness for curriculum changes (Gümüş & Bellibaş, 2025).

Principals who act as facilitators of professional development are able to create a learning climate that encourages teachers to continuously improve their pedagogical practices. The findings of this study indicate that teachers perceive the principal's support as a form of trust and recognition of their professionalism, which ultimately strengthens their motivation and work commitment (Karakose et al., 2024). Leadership that focuses on teacher learning has been shown to positively impact instructional quality and learning innovation. This finding aligns with research showing that teachers feel freer to innovate when principals provide space and support for contextualized learning practices (Liu et al., 2024).

School Climate, Collaboration, and Collective Teacher Efficacy

Although the school climate is perceived as good, research findings indicate that collaboration and transparency still require strengthening. Distributed leadership can only be effective if supported by a clear and consistent collaborative structure, as without such mechanisms, collaboration tends to be informal and less sustainable (Lin, 2022). A collaborative school climate serves as a mediator between school leadership and learning quality. In this study, teachers' need for increased collaboration indicates that a culture of quality has been established, but has not been fully optimized through systematic collaborative practices (Cansoy et al., 2022). School leadership that encourages professional collaboration contributes to increased collective teacher efficacy. This finding is relevant to research showing that principal support strengthens teachers' collective confidence in their ability to improve learning quality (Bellibaş et al., 2025).

Structural Barriers to Improving Educational Quality

This study identified limited infrastructure, administrative burdens, and uneven parental involvement as key barriers to improving educational quality. High administrative burdens often limit the time principals can devote to their role as instructional leaders (OECD, 2021). Limited structural resources can limit the effectiveness of school leadership, even if the principal has high capacity and commitment. This finding aligns with research showing that quality improvement efforts are ongoing, but are not fully optimized due to these limitations (Adi et al., 2024). Support from the school ecosystem, including parental involvement, plays a crucial role in the success of quality improvement programs. This study demonstrates that the principal's role in improving quality is inextricably linked to the support of families and the broader school community. This finding is supported by Ginanto et al. (2024), who found that school leaders act not only as instructional and administrative leaders, but also as community leaders who promote parental involvement.

Implications for Improving Educational Quality

The findings of this study have important implications for educational practice and policy. Learning-oriented principal leadership is the primary foundation for sustainable school quality improvement. Therefore, strengthening principal leadership capacity is a strategic agenda in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar.

Reducing administrative burdens and strengthening systemic support is necessary so that principals can focus on developing learning and teacher professionalism. Therefore, the results of this study provide an empirical basis for policymakers to design school leadership strategies that better support learning quality and human resource development toward Indonesia's Vision 2045.

4. Conclusion

Based on the research results and discussion, it can be concluded that teachers perceive the principal's role as a driver of educational quality in the context of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) to be in the good to very good category. The principal is viewed as having implemented leadership that goes beyond administrative duties by placing learning improvement at the center of school quality development. The most visible forms of leadership are support for teacher professional development, reflective academic supervision, encouragement of learning innovation, and assistance in implementing student-centered learning practices. The findings indicate that learning-oriented leadership can help bridge the Merdeka Belajar policy with actual classroom practice. Through training support, supervision, feedback, and motivation, the principal contributes to strengthening teachers' readiness, confidence, and commitment to improving learning quality. However, the study also found that the quality improvement process has not been fully supported by systematic collaboration and transparent program management. Although the school climate is generally perceived positively, teacher collaboration and program transparency still need to be strengthened to build a more sustainable quality culture.

Several inhibiting factors were also identified, including limited infrastructure, high administrative workload, and uneven parental involvement. These factors affect the optimization of the principal's role as a learning leader. Therefore, principals need to strengthen instructional leadership through more structured professional learning communities, regular reflection forums, and planned follow-up after supervision. At the policy level, support is needed to reduce administrative burdens and provide adequate resources so that principals can focus more on improving learning and teacher professionalism. Overall, this study confirms that the success of Merdeka Belajar is not only determined by policy design, but also by how principal leadership is perceived and experienced by teachers in daily school practices. Principals who act as quality drivers, supported by collaboration and a conducive school ecosystem, are essential for transforming Merdeka Belajar into a sustainable learning culture.

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