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## Kurikulum Merdeka Implementation Strategy in Improving the Quality of Learning for Gen Z in Senior High School

Revina Adelia \*, Suyatno Suyatno, and Enung Hasanah

Education Management, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

\*Email: [2407046005@webmail.uad.ac.id](mailto:2407046005@webmail.uad.ac.id)

### Abstract

Improving the quality of learning is a major challenge in Indonesian education, particularly in the era of digital transformation and the dynamic characteristics of Generation Z. The Kurikulum Merdeka is a response to the demands for more flexible, adaptive, and student-centered learning. This study research purposes to explore the implementation strategies of the Kurikulum Merdeka in improving the quality of learning for Generation Z at SMA Muhammadiyah Toboali. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design, through data collection techniques such as interviews, observations, and documentation involving the principal, teachers, and students. The findings show that the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka at SMA Muhammadiyah Toboali is carried out systematically, collaboratively, and contextually to the needs of students. The principal plays an active role in socializing the curriculum, conducting teacher training, developing a KOSP relevant to school conditions, and conducting digital-based evaluations. Meanwhile, teachers implement differentiated learning, utilize digital technology, and create an interactive and humanistic learning atmosphere. Students experience benefits in the form of increased learning motivation, flexibility in the learning process, and a more personalized assessment experience. In conclusion, the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka at Muhammadiyah High School in Toboali demonstrates that a synergistic strategy combining school leadership, teacher learning innovation, and an understanding of Generation Z characteristics can bring about real transformation in the educational process. With an adaptive and contextual approach, the Kurikulum Merdeka not only addresses the challenges of the 21st century but also strengthens the quality of meaningful, relevant, and impactful learning for students. With an adaptive and contextual approach, the Kurikulum Merdeka not only responds to the challenges of the 21st century but also enhances the quality of meaningful, relevant, and impactful learning for students.

**Keywords:** Education Management, Generation Z, Kurikulum Merdeka, Learning Quality, Penggerak School

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## INTRODUCTION

Education plays a pivotal role in shaping students into innovative and adaptive individuals who can keep pace with rapid global and technological change. Today, education is not only aimed at achieving high academic achievement but also at producing individuals who can become agents of change in society (Nasution et al., 2023). Therefore, improving learning quality has become a crucial priority in educational development. One of the main factors determining learning quality is effective classroom management (Asmara & Nindianti, 2019), which aligns with global education reform agendas promoting efficiency, equity, and innovation (Tahir, 2017).

Student learning motivation and teacher creativity are essential elements in supporting learning success (Durisa et al., 2022). A conducive learning environment, positive teacher–student relationships, and active learning approaches contribute significantly to effective learning (Mahmudah, 2018; Kurniawan et al., 2024; Jais, 2019). However, despite these theoretical ideals, many schools still struggle to translate them into consistent classroom practices.

Previous studies indicate that limited funding, inadequate resources, insufficient teacher competence, and weak evaluation systems hinder learning quality improvement (Khonsa et al., 2025). Low innovation in educational management (Raharjo, 2014) and unequal infrastructure between urban and rural schools (Primadona et al., 2024) further widen educational disparities. Nevertheless, most of these studies focus primarily on structural and administrative constraints, while paying limited attention to how curriculum implementation strategies operate at the school level.

Teacher quality, curriculum relevance, and managerial support are widely recognized as key factors in enhancing learning effectiveness (Fentari et al., 2023; Suleman & Idayanti, 2024). The curriculum functions as a framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating learning activities (Zaeni et al., 2023). Kurikulum Merdeka was developed to address 21st-century challenges and the Society 5.0 era by emphasizing flexibility, student-centered learning, and technology integration (Haryati et al., 2022; Maulidia et al., 2023).

Curriculum reform aims to improve educational quality and prepare competent human resources for Indonesia's Golden Vision 2045 (Indriyani & Jannah, 2023). Through adaptive learning approaches, Kurikulum Merdeka is expected to create meaningful learning experiences (Thoriq et al., 2024). However, although many studies have examined the policy framework and general implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka, empirical evidence regarding its practical impact on learning quality at specific school contexts remains limited.

Leadership is considered a crucial factor in ensuring successful curriculum implementation (Fitriana et al., 2022; Fatirul & Walujo, 2022). Teachers' understanding of curriculum innovation also influences teaching effectiveness (Kurniati et al., 2022). Kurikulum Merdeka promotes differentiated and personalized learning tailored to student characteristics (Kemendikbudristek, 2022), which is relevant for Generation Z learners (Putri & Hidayat, 2023). Nevertheless, many schools still lack systematic strategies and integrated models that connect leadership, teacher readiness, technological innovation, and curriculum adaptation.

Most previous research tends to examine these factors separately. However, few studies have comprehensively explored how leadership, technology integration, and adaptive curriculum design interact in improving learning quality, particularly in private Islamic schools under Muhammadiyah management. This indicates a significant research gap in understanding contextualized implementation strategies.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the implementation strategies of Kurikulum Merdeka in improving learning quality at Muhammadiyah Toboali High School. This research focuses on how technological innovation, leadership practices, and adaptive curriculum design collaboratively bridge the gap between policy expectations and classroom practices. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated and context-specific analysis of curriculum implementation within a Muhammadiyah educational institution, providing empirical insights that have not been sufficiently addressed in previous studies.

## METHOD

Research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, which was chosen so that the researcher can thoroughly and in-depth explore the phenomenon of the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in the school environment. According to (Creswell, 2018) The qualitative approach aims to understand social dynamics and humanitarian issues through descriptive data. Therefore, the focus of the study is directed to the real experiences experienced by school principals, teachers, and students.

The research was conducted at Muhammadiyah Toboali High School. The main data in this study were in the form of primary data obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with school principals, vice principals, teachers, and students to explore strategies for implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Observations were carried out by directly observing teaching and learning activities, while documentation served as complementary data to support and enrich information obtained from other sources.



Figure 1. Research Procedure

The stages of this qualitative research are illustrated in Figure 1. The process begins with the preparation stage, which includes instrument development and research design. The implementation stage involves conducting interviews and observations in the field. The collected data are then systematically recorded and processed before being analyzed. Finally, data validation is performed through source triangulation to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings. The research procedure consisted of five stages: preparation, implementation, data recording and processing, data analysis, and data validation. The validation stage was conducted using source triangulation techniques to ensure the validity and accuracy of the information obtained from various informants.

In processing the data, this study employed qualitative data analysis techniques using a descriptive approach to systematically and deeply describe and interpret the findings. The data analysis process comprised three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction stage, the collected data were selected and focused on relevant information. Subsequently, the data were presented in narrative form to facilitate understanding and interpretation. Conclusions were drawn inductively based on patterns and findings that emerged from the field. To maintain the accuracy and consistency of the data, all interview results were systematically transcribed, and sources were triangulated to ensure the validity and reliability of the data obtained.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research related to the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMA Muhammadiyah Tobaoli, as part of the *Penggerak* School Program, show a number of significant findings from three main perspectives: principals, teachers, and students. Research shows that the principal plays a strategic managerial role in the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at Muhammadiyah High School in Tobaoli. Through adaptive leadership, the principal is able to create a learning environment that supports teacher innovation and active student participation. Teachers are given the space to innovate and integrate technology into their learning, although they still face challenges in the curriculum adaptation process. Meanwhile, Gen Z students become more active, creative, and enthusiastic because learning is presented contextually and in line with their digital nature.

From a managerial point of view, school principals have a strategic role in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

*"The strategy we are carrying out in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka consists of several steps. First, we held socialization to all parties in schools, including teachers and education staff, to better understand the Kurikulum Merdeka. We also invite experienced external sources to explain more clearly. After that, we adjust the school's curriculum and lesson plan according to the existing guidelines. We also give teachers the freedom to design learning that is in accordance with the spirit of independent learning, which is student-centered (SS, Participant 1)".*

Various strategies are carried out in its implementation, including: internal and external socialization related to the new paradigm of learning, involvement of professional resource persons for teacher training, preparation of contextual Education Unit Operational Curriculum (KOSP), and implementation of continuous training with the support of digital evaluation systems such as E-Kinerja. The principal also facilitates comparative studies and ensures the psychological readiness of teachers during the curriculum transition process. This is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the principal's various managerial strategies in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at Muhammadiyah High School in Tobaoli. The principal plays a crucial role as a leader and manager of learning. Through internal and external outreach, the principal ensures that all members of the school community understand the curriculum's direction. By involving professional resource persons, the principal helps improve

teacher competency. In developing the KOSP (Operational Education Unit Curriculum), the principal becomes a policy designer who adapts the curriculum to the school's needs. The implementation of digital evaluation (E-Kinerja) demonstrates data-based monitoring of teacher performance. Meanwhile, comparative studies are conducted to adapt good practices from other schools. Overall, these strategies help create more adaptive, collaborative, and Gen Z-friendly learning.

**Table 1. Principal's Managerial Strategy**

No.	Strategy	Form of Implementation	Purpose	The Role of Managers in Improving the Quality of Gen Z Learning
1.	Internal & external socialization	Workshops, meetings, documentation	Improved curriculum understanding	The principal acts as the primary communicator
2.	Involvement of professional resource persons	Training from the office/institution	Strengthening teacher competence	The principal acts as a facilitator of professional networks
3.	Preparation of KOSP (Operational Education Unit Curriculum)	School curriculum development team	School curriculum	The principal acts as a policy direction designer
4.	Digital evaluation (E-Performance)	Online teacher performance reporting	Accountability & coaching	The principal acts as a data-based quality controller
5.	Comparative study	Visits to referral schools	Adaptation of good practices	The principal acts as an initiator of innovation

From the pedagogical side of teachers, the use of diagnostic assessments was identified as the basis for the implementation of differentiated learning.

*Yes, before starting learning, we usually conduct a diagnostic assessment first to see the student's initial ability. We use the results to compile teaching modules that are in accordance with the character of students. The principle of differentiation learning is also very helpful for us in choosing the right approach. We also blend learning media, such as audio-visual, experimental videos, and interactive applications such as Padlet or Quizizz. We combine this with modules and textbooks so that learning remains interesting, but still in accordance with the purpose of the material (AT, Participant 2)".*

Teachers also utilize digital media such as *Padlet*, *Google Classroom*, and *Wordwall*, as well as apply project-based and collaborative learning approaches. In addition, teachers build communicative and humanistic interactions to create a comfortable and motivating learning atmosphere for students. This is outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2. Teacher's Pedagogical Strategy**

No.	Strategy	Media/ Methods	Fit with Gen Z
1.	Assessment diagnostic	Interest & ability questionnaire	Differentiated learning
2.	Digital Media	<i>Classroom, Canva, Padlet, Quizizz, YouTube</i>	Visual & interactive
3.	Collaborative projects	Case studies, field practice	Participative and <i>problem-based</i>
4.	Humanist communication	Discussion, motivation, reflection	Improve relationships and motivation

Table 2 shows the teaching strategies used by teachers to support Gen Z students in learning. Teachers use diagnostic assessments to understand students' interests and abilities, so learning can be adjusted to their needs. The use of digital media such as Classroom, Canva, Padlet, Quizizz, and YouTube makes learning more visual and interactive. Through collaborative projects, students learn to work together and solve problems in real situations. Meanwhile, humanist communication like discussions and motivation helps build good

relationships and increases learning enthusiasm. These strategies make learning more active, interesting, and suitable for Gen Z characteristics.

Meanwhile, from the students' experience, it was found that they felt that learning was more flexible, fun, and in accordance with their respective learning styles.

*In my opinion, ma'am, learning is now more exciting. Teachers are now more active in delivering material and often provide motivation before learning begins. The material provided is also diverse, not just one form. It can be a video, poster, or news. We as students are also given the choice of which media we want to learn from, for example I prefer to learn through video (AF, Participant 3)".*

Students appreciate the role of teachers as supportive supervisors, a diversity of innovative learning media, and a more personalized and non-burdensome assessment system.



**Figure 2.** Use of Digital Media by Teachers at Muhammadiyah High School

As shown in Figure 2, teachers at Muhammadiyah Toboali High School actively integrate digital media such as videos and presentations into classroom activities. This use of technology not only supports flexible and engaging learning but also aligns with students' preferences for interactive and visually rich materials.

These findings show an increase in motivation, active participation, and a sense of responsibility for students' learning process. This is outlined in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Students' Response to the *Kurikulum Merdeka*

No.	Aspects	Student Response	Impact
1.	Learning Methods	Feel freer, you can choose according to your interests.	Increased motivation
2.	The Role of the Teacher	More supportive & communicative	Students feel valued
3.	Media	Varied: posters, videos, props	Improved material comprehension
4.	Assessment	More personal & varied	Students' confidence rises

Table 3 shows that students respond positively to the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. They feel freer to learn based on their interests, which makes them more motivated. Teachers are more supportive and communicative, so students feel appreciated. The use of varied media like posters and videos helps them understand lessons better. Personal and diverse assessments also increase students' confidence. Overall, learning becomes more enjoyable and suitable for Gen Z students.

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMA Muhammadiyah Toboali has been carried out in a systematic, collaborative, and adaptive manner to meet the needs of Generation Z. This success is supported by integrated strategies at three levels, namely principal leadership, teacher pedagogical practices, and student learning experiences. These dimensions work synergistically to improve learning quality. This alignment reflects the importance of coordination between leadership, instruction, and learner characteristics (Heenan et al., 2023; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Such integration is essential for sustaining curriculum reform.

At the managerial level, school principals play a strategic role in encouraging educational transformation. Internal socialization, involvement of professional resource persons, collaborative preparation of KOSP, and digital monitoring through E-Kinerja form a structured managerial system. These strategies reflect transformational leadership that promotes innovation and participation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Schools

with supportive cultures are better able to overcome curriculum implementation challenges (Idialita et al., 2024; Guskey, 2002). This environment strengthens teachers' readiness for change.

Transformational leadership also influences organizational development and professional ethics. By strengthening trust, shared values, and collective vision, principals enhance teachers' commitment (Alessa, 2021). Leadership behavior becomes a model for competence development and professional conduct (Hawkins, 2014). Moreover, transformational leadership positively affects motivation and institutional performance (Deng et al., 2023). Ethical decision-making is also reinforced through professional-oriented leadership (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021).

The importance of leadership is further supported by Amin et al. (2016), who found that curriculum optimization depends on teacher motivation and principal strategy. Teachers with high motivation tend to innovate and apply learner-centered approaches. Principals facilitate this process by creating supportive systems and policies. This synergy encourages continuous improvement. As a result, learning environments become more dynamic and effective.

From a pedagogical perspective, teachers implement differentiated learning based on diagnostic assessments. This approach allows teachers to identify students' readiness, interests, and learning styles (Langelaan et al., 2024; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Adaptive learning practices further strengthen differentiated instruction (Herliana et al., 2024). Differentiated instruction increases participation and strengthens teacher-student interaction (Chi, 2023). However, its effectiveness depends on adequate training and institutional support (Eikeland & Ohna, 2022; Guskey, 2002).

Teachers also integrate digital media such as Google Classroom, Padlet, Wordwall, and Quizizz into instruction. These platforms support interactive and flexible learning processes. Digital tools enhance deeper learning and student engagement (Dede, 2014). Technology integration also helps present materials in various formats. Consequently, students become more active and involved in learning.

Project based learning is implemented to develop students' critical thinking and collaboration skills. Through project activities, students apply knowledge in real-life contexts. This approach encourages creativity and responsibility. Meta-analytical studies confirm that project-based learning contributes significantly to 21st-century skills development (Tuyen & Tien, 2021). Therefore, this model is essential for preparing students for global challenges.

In addition, blended learning and flipped classroom models are applied to support independent learning. Students access learning materials before classroom discussions. Classroom time is then used for interaction and problem-solving. Flipped classroom approaches enhance creativity and active participation (Rodríguez et al., 2019). These models also strengthen students' learning autonomy.

Considering the characteristics of Generation Z, teachers design learning that is digital-oriented and interactive. Generation Z learners are accustomed to multitasking and technology based communication (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Therefore, inquiry based, problem based, cooperative, and experiential learning models are applied. These approaches match students' learning preferences. Consequently, learning becomes more relevant and enjoyable.

The use of multimedia such as videos, PowerPoint, and Canva further enhances learning effectiveness. Visual materials help students understand complex concepts more easily. Proper media selection supports creativity development (Wahyuni et al., 2023). Video-based learning media also positively influence student interest and comprehension (Purba et al., 2024). Thus, learning outcomes can be improved.

*Kurikulum Merdeka* provides flexibility for teachers to design contextual and student-centered learning. Teachers adapt learning strategies based on student characteristics and school conditions (Yusmadi, 2024). This flexibility encourages innovation and experimentation. Literature reviews also confirm the curriculum's emphasis on experiential learning (Tupalessy, 2025). As a result, learning becomes more meaningful.

From the student perspective, current learning strategies create a supportive and personalized environment. Students feel valued because they are given autonomy in choosing learning methods. Assessment focuses on both processes and outcomes. This approach reduces academic pressure and increases motivation. These findings align with Pitaloka and Arsanti (2022) and Zou et al. (2025).

Innovative learning environments promote collaboration and responsiveness. Adaptive systems support teacher professional development (Niemi, 2021). Institutional support strengthens sustainable innovation (Blackmore et al., 2011). Effective lesson study requires clear structural support (Valtonen et al., 2021). Digital readiness is also essential for long-term effectiveness (Mystakidis et al., 2019).

Teachers with high professional agency are able to overcome institutional barriers. They actively seek opportunities for improvement (Bhardwaj et al., 2025). Positive teacher student relationships foster trust and

comfort. Social emotional learning and mentoring programs strengthen collaboration (Ezeaku & Okoye, 2025). These conditions create safe and supportive learning environments.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in only one school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, students' academic achievement was not measured quantitatively, so the direct impact of the implementation on learning outcomes could not be empirically evaluated. In addition, time and resource constraints influenced the depth of data collection and analysis. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve broader samples and apply mixed method approaches in order to obtain more comprehensive and robust findings.

Despite these limitations, the findings indicate that the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka has the potential to support sustainable educational transformation through integrated leadership, innovative pedagogy, and student centered learning practices. Collaboration among principals, teachers, and students contributes to strengthening institutional capacity, while curriculum flexibility allows schools to continuously adapt learning practices to evolving educational needs. Furthermore, learning innovations implemented within this framework support the development of both student competencies and character, thereby fostering a more future oriented learning environment. These findings provide important insights for schools and policymakers in strengthening the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka across diverse educational contexts.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMA Muhammadiyah Toboali shows that this curriculum is able to bring real transformation in the world of education, especially in answering the challenges of 21st century learning and the needs of generation Z. From the managerial side, the principal plays an active role in designing strategic and contextual policies. Teachers apply innovative and adaptive pedagogical approaches, such as differentiated learning, the use of digital media, and project-based learning. Meanwhile, students feel increased motivation, freedom in learning, and a more meaningful and enjoyable learning experience. These three perspectives show the integration between policies, learning strategies, and psychological approaches that support each other, making the *Kurikulum Merdeka* a progressive step in creating a more relevant, inclusive, and transformative education. Further research is recommended to examine the long-term impact of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* on the learning of both Generation Z and Generation Alpha students, including the challenges of its implementation in schools with limited resources, as well as the role of school leadership and community support in creating an adaptive and relevant learning environment for both generations.

## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

**Revina Adelia:** Conceptualization, Methodology, and Validation; **Suyatno:** Methodology, Formal Analysis, Resources, and Writing - Original Draft; and **Enung Hasanah:** Data Curation, Project Administration, and Writing - Original Draft. All authors have read and approved the final version of this manuscript.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval and institutional regulations.

## DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare no known financial conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

## DECLARATION OF ETHICS

The authors declare that the research and writing of this manuscript adhere to ethical standards of research and publication, in accordance with scientific principles, and are free from plagiarism.

## DECLARATION OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) and other AI-assisted tools were used prudently, not excessively, during the research and preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, ChatGPT is used for *brainstorming* ideas, and Mendelay for citations. All AI-generated material was reviewed and edited for accuracy, completeness, and compliance with ethical and scholarly standards. The authors accept full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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