

Challenges of Madrasah Organizational Culture in Promoting Autonomy and Creativity of Islamic Education Teachers in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract: School organizational culture influences the success of the Merdeka Curriculum, but bureaucratic and hierarchical cultures often hinder teacher autonomy and creativity. This study aims to analyze school organizational strategies, their implications for teacher autonomy and creativity, and educational strategies that support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The method used is a literature study, which includes reading various journals, academic books, and research reports. The research results show that a collaborative, adaptive, and participatory organizational culture is very important for driving the success of the Merdeka curriculum, which can be achieved through transformational leadership strategies, collaborative supervision, and school autonomy to create an innovative and autonomous work environment that aligns with the Merdeka curriculum.

Keywords: School Organizational Culture; Teacher Autonomy; Creativity; Merdeka Curriculum.

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Abstrak: Budaya organisasi sekolah memengaruhi keberhasilan Kurikulum Merdeka, namun budaya birokratis dan hierarkis masih kerap menghambat otonomi dan kreativitas guru. penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi organisasi sekolah, implikasinya terhadap otonomi dan kreativitas guru, serta strategi pendidikan yang mendukung implementasi kurikulum Merdeka. Metode yang digunakan adalah studi literatur, yang meliputi pembacaan berbagai jurnal, buku akademik, dan laporan penelitian. hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa budaya organisasi yang kolaboratif, adaptif, dan partisipatif, sangat penting untuk mendorong keberhasilan kurikulum Merdeka, yang dapat dilakukan dengan strategi kepemimpinan transformasional, pengawasan kolaboratif, dan otonomi sekolah untuk menciptakan lingkungan kerja yang

inovatif dan otonom yang sesuai dengan kurikulum Merdeka.

Kata Kunci: Budaya Organisasi Sekolah; Otonomi Guru; Kreativitas; Kurikulum Merdeka.

A. Introduction

The Merdeka Curriculum is a form of educational reform in Indonesia that focuses on improving student quality through teacher development, positioning teachers as the main actors in the educational process. This curriculum places teachers not merely as policy implementers, but as designers, drivers, and innovators of learning who possess professional skills to adapt instructional strategies to students' needs and characteristics. The Merdeka Curriculum represents a curriculum development process that emphasizes students' needs and growth, as well as efficiency and competencies required in the global era. Through the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers and schools are granted autonomy to choose teaching methods and materials that best suit students' needs. Accordingly, teachers are able to guide students toward more contextual and relevant learning experiences (Tunas & Pangkey, 2024). The success of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation largely depends on teachers' roles as learning facilitators who assist students in developing their skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Roos et al., 2023). However, teachers' creativity and freedom cannot develop optimally without support from the school environment, particularly in terms of school organization. A positive organizational culture encourages collaboration, trust, and teamwork, which are essential for fostering innovation in educational work. Without an adaptive organizational environment, the Merdeka Curriculum risks being hindered by management practices rooted in bureaucratic and hierarchical systems.

Traditional school organizational culture still exerts a strong influence on existing human resources. In addition to principals and school administrators, teachers are among the most critical elements contributing to the success of improving school productivity. School organizational culture refers to the customs, norms, values, behaviors, habits, beliefs, attitudes, and traditions developed by human resources within the school—such as students, staff, and community members—to achieve specific

educational goals. School organizational culture can influence all systems and performance within the institution (Fauziah et al., 2024). A positive organizational culture can create an environment that promotes teamwork, improves work outcomes, and ultimately enhances teachers' professionalism and performance. Conversely, a poor organizational culture can reduce employee motivation, cause stress, and lower the quality of education provided (Nurlathifah & Hidayat, 2025). Rigid, hierarchical, and bureaucratic cultures tend to restrict teachers' mobility and diminish their motivation to innovate. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, its success is highly dependent on the extent to which school organizational culture provides space for teachers' professional autonomy.

Previous research entitled "*Empowering Educational Autonomy to Implement the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasahs*" by Ainissyifa, Nasrullah, and Fatonah (2024) focused on the role of educational management in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasahs through planning, organizing, implementation, and evaluation functions, as well as identifying supporting and inhibiting factors such as institutional readiness, teacher training, and resource availability. However, this study positioned autonomy primarily within the framework of policy and institutional management and did not deeply examine the dimension of madrasah organizational culture as a factor influencing teachers' professional experiences, particularly in terms of innovation and pedagogical freedom. Moreover, teachers were examined in a general sense without specific focus on Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, who possess unique characteristics, values, and role demands within the madrasah ecosystem. Teacher creativity was also not a primary focus, but rather positioned as an implicit goal of the Merdeka Curriculum. Therefore, this study addresses the research gap by examining "*The Challenges of Madrasah Organizational Culture in Encouraging Autonomy and Creativity of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum*," focusing on the influence of values, norms, relational patterns, and organizational cultural climate on the autonomy and creativity of PAI teachers in instructional practice.

Based on research findings, some schools still exhibit bureaucratic organizational cultures, where compliance with procedures and administrative regulations takes precedence over providing space for teacher creativity and autonomy. Hierarchical management structures and slow decision-making processes result in teachers lacking the necessary skills to guide student learning in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum (Syifaurrrahmah et al., 2025). Furthermore, literature analysis indicates that school organizational culture in Indonesia remains dominated by hierarchical cultures that emphasize stability, rule compliance, and centralized coordination. This culture tends to place decision-making authority at the upper management level, while teachers are positioned as policy implementers with limited space for initiative (Ngo, 2024). Such conditions lead to low school autonomy and limited teacher creativity and pedagogical innovation, preventing the full realization of Merdeka Curriculum principles—such as flexibility, collaboration, and student-centered learning—at the educational unit level. Therefore, transforming organizational culture toward a more participatory, adaptive, collaborative, and autonomy-supportive model is a critical prerequisite for the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The relevance of this study lies in its contribution to strengthening the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum as a new educational paradigm in Indonesia that promotes creativity, teamwork, critical thinking, and 21st-century skills (Susandi et al., 2025). The success of this curriculum is strongly influenced by school organizational culture, as a positive and adaptive work environment encourages teachers to adopt more innovative and original teaching approaches. Conversely, educational institutions that are predominantly hierarchical and bureaucratic tend to limit teachers' creativity in educational practice. Research shows that improvements in school organizational culture lead to increased productivity, motivation, and effectiveness of teachers in performing their professional duties (Musbikah et al., 2021). Accordingly, this study seeks to examine: (1) What are the challenges of school organizational culture? (2) How do these challenges affect teacher autonomy? (3) What is their impact on teacher creativity? (4) What strategies can strengthen organizational culture in alignment with the principles of Merdeka Learning? The objective of this research is to

analyze the dynamics of school organizational culture within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum and to provide strategic recommendations for strengthening a culture that promotes collaboration, innovation, and student-centered learning.

B. Research Method

This study employs a literature review approach (library research) aimed at analyzing various relevant sources of information concerning school organizational culture and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. A literature study, also known as library research, can be defined as a series of activities consistent with methods of collecting data from published sources, analyzing and synthesizing information, and organizing research materials (Irawan & Mutmainah, 2022). This approach is important because it enables researchers to examine in depth the concepts, theories, and research findings related to the topic under investigation.

Data sources were obtained from various scholarly publications, including national and international journal articles, academic books, and research reports. The data collection process was conducted through a systematic search using databases such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, Garuda, and SINTA, employing keywords including “*school organizational culture*,” “*teacher autonomy*,” “*teacher creativity*,” and “*Merdeka Curriculum*.”

Data analysis was carried out in three stages: data reduction, thematic categorization, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was achieved by selecting information relevant to the research focus. Subsequently, each finding was categorized according to the main themes identified. The final stage involved drawing conclusions by interpreting patterns in the findings to produce a conceptual synthesis that contributes both theoretically and practically to the development of school organizational culture aligned with the principles of Merdeka Learning.

C. Results and Discussion

Challenges of School Organizational Culture

Organizational culture has a significant impact on a school's ability to innovate and adapt to changes in educational policy (Putri et al., 2023). One of the main challenges in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum lies in the dominance of hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational cultures in most schools. This condition is reinforced by Hanifah and Frinaldi (2025), who argue that organizational culture in Indonesian educational institutions remains strongly influenced by bureaucratic work practices that emphasize procedures and hierarchy. This culture is a legacy of the colonial administrative system, which prioritized stability, compliance, and strict control over hierarchical positions.

In the school context, this organizational culture is manifested through the dominance of authority by school leaders, rigid written regulations, and decision-making processes centralized at the managerial level. As a result, teachers' flexibility and innovation in developing learning practices become limited. School organizational structures are largely based on hierarchical cultural patterns that emphasize stability and control, which are not aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum that promotes independence, creativity, and experimentation in the learning process. School organizational culture remains positioned within the *hierarchy culture quadrant*, emphasizing stability and control that contradict the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which demand autonomy, creativity, and development in teaching and learning activities.

Another challenge is the low effectiveness of teacher collaboration, particularly within Subject Teacher Working Groups (*Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran*—MGMP). Research findings indicate that several teachers reported MGMP activities often do not function optimally due to limited time and large student numbers, which hinder meaningful discussion and reflective learning practices. Furthermore, the implementation of reflection and collaboration in teaching remains unsystematic, which explains why collaborative workdays in many schools have not been effectively implemented. These conditions indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum, which

encourages collaboration and reflection, has not yet been fully integrated into school operations (Fatimah, Rozimela, & Syamwil, 2022).

In addition, school leadership support for teacher innovation remains limited, both in terms of policy and resource allocation. In many cases, school organizational culture remains rigid and administratively oriented, making it difficult for the processes of seeking support, implementing, and evaluating new ideas to develop optimally (Nandini & Indrasari, 2022). This condition has implications for teacher creativity, which is often constrained by organizational structures that do not fully support innovative and collaborative learning as envisioned in the Merdeka Curriculum. In fact, a positive organizational culture can enhance innovative performance by providing intrinsic motivation and making employees feel valued by the organization, thereby encouraging them to engage in innovative behaviors that benefit the institution (Noerchoidah, Ariprabowo, & Nurdina, 2022). According to Anabelle et al. (2023), tangible support significantly influences teachers' innovative ideas. Therefore, innovation in the context of this curriculum should not be limited to classroom teaching activities but should also encompass all processes undertaken by teachers to generate, develop, and implement new ideas relevant to students' learning growth. Thus, changes in organizational culture represent a crucial step for schools to align with the new Merdeka Curriculum paradigm, which emphasizes flexibility, professionalism, and experimentation in teaching methods.

Implications for Teacher Autonomy

In the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, teacher autonomy is considered one of the most essential elements that teachers must attain. It represents a form of teacher empowerment that directly influences the success of the learning process and school development (Intifadah & Wirza, 2020). However, in practice, many teachers still encounter obstacles due to organizational cultures that do not fully support professional independence. This is largely attributed to complex and well-established bureaucratic structures, which, although designed to enhance efficiency in decision-making, often generate excessive information flow and misunderstandings in policy formulation (Malik et al., 2023).

Bureaucratic systems intended to support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum frequently become barriers to teacher autonomy. Hierarchical and procedural structures limit teachers' capacity to innovate, highlighting the need for more flexible and collaborative school reforms that align with the spirit of *Merdeka Belajar* (Adawiyah et al., 2024). Organizational culture significantly influences decision-making processes in schools, as values and participation patterns determine policy direction. However, decision-making becomes more rigid and difficult when the prevailing culture is characterized by low levels of trust (*low-trust culture*) (Soelistya et al., 2022).

In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, a low-trust culture poses a serious threat, as it restricts teachers' ability to independently develop student-centered ideas and innovate in the classroom. When decision-making is dominated by hierarchical structures and leadership control, teachers' autonomy becomes constrained, and curriculum implementation loses its collaborative and reflective spirit, which should be a core component of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Impact on Teacher Creativity

One of the most significant barriers to developing innovative teaching methods in schools is the lack of space for creativity and experimentation within an education system that remains rigid and exam-oriented. This system consistently positions teachers and students in passive roles, where success is determined primarily by examination results rather than by the ability to think critically, collaborate, or create. Teachers are often constrained by strict administrative regulations and standards, limiting their capacity to test new ideas that align with students' characteristics and local contexts.

Moreover, limited training that emphasizes creative instructional approaches, such as project-based learning, has resulted in many teachers lacking confidence to innovate in the classroom. Additionally, insufficient policy support and highly hierarchical school organizational cultures further exacerbate this condition, as new ideas often lack opportunities for evaluation or development (Badri & Azisi, 2024). Consequently, both teachers and students lose opportunities to explore ideas and develop their potential optimally. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, this situation

presents a major challenge, as the curriculum is specifically designed to provide space for creativity and experimentation, allowing teachers to independently adapt the curriculum to students' needs and interests.

Strategies for Strengthening Organizational Culture to Support the Merdeka Curriculum

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum highlights the need for changes in school organizations to align with the principles of learning, collaboration, and innovation. Long-standing hierarchical and bureaucratic structures must be transformed into more dynamic, participatory systems that focus on developing the potential of teachers and students. Accordingly, school organizational strategies should be designed to foster mutual trust, enhance collaborative communication, and create leadership systems that encourage innovation and teamwork. Through these efforts, schools can truly become “independent” learning environments, where teachers are empowered to innovate and students can develop according to their abilities and interests.

Transformational leadership theory is highly relevant to the development of strategies for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, as it encourages leaders to inspire, motivate, and support teachers in innovating their teaching practices. Through optimal stimulation, intellectual encouragement, and individualized consideration, transformational leaders help teachers develop their potential, experiment with new methods, and feel valued in decision-making processes (Warman et al., 2024). In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, transformational leadership serves as a foundation for creating collaborative, reflective, and adaptive school cultures in which teacher autonomy and creativity can grow in balance.

Furthermore, flexible, adaptive, and change-oriented cultures are essential components in establishing innovative and responsive school organizational cultures. Schools that cultivate these principles will be better prepared to face the challenges of implementing curricula that emphasize teacher-led autonomy and experimentation. Inclusive leadership and the provision of resources for risk mitigation are critical factors in fostering educational innovation. Reflective, collaborative, and creative practices can flourish when principals and policymakers place trust in and support teachers' new

ideas (Nugroho, 2024). Thus, strategies for organizing school activities in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum must be grounded in efforts to create flexible, participatory, and open work climates, ensuring that all members share responsibility for building meaningful and independent learning environments.

Granting autonomy to schools is also a key strategy for strengthening organizational culture that supports the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Through autonomy, schools can assess their internal and external potential and implement more contextual, relevant, and innovative programs. This autonomy introduces new dynamics in school management, encouraging all school personnel—particularly teachers—to become more participatory and responsible in decision-making and educational program implementation. Autonomy is not merely a marker of decentralization but also a means of empowerment that enhances awareness of the importance of collaboration and reflection in improving learning quality (Syafaruddin et al., 2012).

In addition, the implementation of collaborative supervision further strengthens strategies for cultivating healthy and adaptive organizational cultures. Through collaborative supervision, teachers receive reflection and support to enhance their professionalism. Effective academic supervision conducted in a calm and open manner strengthens trust between leaders and teachers, fosters a sense of ownership of the school's vision, and encourages innovation in teaching practices. Consequently, adaptive, reflective, and collaborative organizational cultures can align with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, positioning teachers as key agents of educational change (Mutahajar, 2019).

Overall, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum signifies a fundamental shift in school organizational culture—from traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic approaches toward more collaborative, participatory, and adaptive learning environments. Challenges related to trust, reliance on structural directives, and limited space for innovation underscore the need for a paradigm shift in education. Organizational development through transformational leadership, collaborative supervision, and the provision of autonomy is essential for creating work environments

that foster trust, creativity, and professional responsibility among teachers. With such a culture, schools become not merely sites of knowledge transmission but dynamic educational ecosystems aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes collaboration, innovation, and critical thinking as key pillars for improving the quality of education in Indonesia.

D. Conclusion

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation is strongly influenced by schools' ability to transform their organizational culture from hierarchical and bureaucratic models into more participatory, collaborative, and adaptive forms. Organizational cultures that continue to emphasize strict compliance with rules and procedures restrict teachers' professional space, making it difficult for flexibility and innovation in learning to develop. Low levels of collaboration among teachers, minimal leadership support for new ideas, and the absence of a strong reflective culture indicate that the spirit of *Merdeka Belajar* has not yet been fully internalized in school educational practices. This condition highlights the urgent need for a paradigm shift in the management of educational organizations to enable teachers to actively serve as drivers of innovation and contextual learning.

Furthermore, this study affirms that empowering teachers through enhanced professional autonomy, collaborative supervision, and transformational leadership constitutes a key strategy for strengthening organizational culture in support of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation. An organizational culture grounded in trust, collaboration, and support for creativity fosters reflective and innovative learning environments that focus on developing students' potential. Thus, transforming school organizational culture is not merely an administrative prerequisite but a fundamental foundation for realizing a truly "independent" education system, in which teachers are provided with professional freedom of expression and students are able to grow in accordance with their talents and interests.

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