

School Principals' Perceptions of Curriculum Reform: A Case Study in Central Java

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesia emphasizes curriculum adaptation based on students' needs, institutional characteristics, and local contexts. Key mediating principles—focus, alignment, and flexibility—guide curriculum execution across classroom, school, district, and national levels. This study investigates school principals' perceptions of these principles and explores their mediation strategies in preparing for curriculum implementation. This qualitative exploratory case study involved nine purposively selected principals from elementary, junior high, and senior high schools in three residencies of Central Java (Semarang, Pati, and Pekalongan). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. Triangulation, member checking, and expert validation were employed to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Principals demonstrated positive perceptions of the *Kurikulum Merdeka's* mediating principles. At the classroom level, strategies focused on student-centered learning and literacy activities. At the school level, internal collaboration and professional learning communities supported alignment with local needs. District-level mediation involved cooperation with education offices and stakeholder forums. At the national level, principals simplified policy directives through infographics and digital media. Curriculum leadership played a central role in aligning policy with practice. The study highlights how curriculum leadership facilitates the integration of national policies into local school contexts through multi-level mediation strategies. Differences in implementation were noted across school levels, particularly in stakeholder engagement and assessment practices. To ensure sustainable and contextual implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, targeted curriculum leadership training—especially for elementary school principals—is recommended.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Curriculum reform in Indonesia, including the emergence of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, is a response to learning loss and educational disparities caused by the pandemic, as well as changing societal needs. The concept of *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn), which underpins this curriculum, is rooted in the educational philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara, emphasizing student independence. The *Kurikulum Merdeka* is designed based on principles of simplicity, competence orientation, flexibility, alignment, collaboration, and research-based practice. Its successful implementation relies heavily on school leaders capable of translating these principles into the context of their educational institutions and communities.

Curriculum leadership requires school principals to foster collaboration with various stakeholders in order to align the curriculum vision both vertically and horizontally (Ylimaki, 2011). The effectiveness of such leadership is reflected in the school's vision, classroom-level coordination, communication of curriculum issues within the community, and the professionalism of the principal (Shaked & Schechter, 2017; Mäkiharju & Hilli, 2024). Uljens (2023) emphasizes the importance of principals' mediating capacities across four levels: classroom, school, city, and national, each demanding distinct strategies and contextual understandings of policy, student needs, and local conditions.

Although the *Kurikulum Merdeka* provides broad opportunities for schools to innovate, many principals, particularly at the elementary and junior high school levels, still lack a comprehensive understanding of its core principles. For example, Suwardi (2023) found that several school principals in the Banten region struggle to interpret the principles of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* due to disparities in understanding and limited training. Meanwhile, Ramadina (2021) revealed that in East Java, principals are regarded as key to successful curriculum implementation, as school policy directions largely depend on their leadership. In fact, the success of curriculum reform relies heavily on the literacy, adaptive competence, and mediation capacity of school leaders in bridging national policies with local needs.

This study seeks to address three main questions. First, how do principals at elementary, junior high, and senior high schools in Central Java perceive the principles of Focus, Alignment, and Flexibility in the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*? Second, what mediation strategies do principals employ to involve stakeholders across different levels, and how do they contextualize national policies to fit their school environments? Third, to what extent does the curriculum leadership capacity of principals contribute to the alignment of curriculum implementation with students' needs and the sociocultural contexts of their respective regions?

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the role of school principals in mediating curriculum policy across multiple levels from classroom to school, district, and national. Few studies have specifically examined how this mediating function is enacted by school leaders in the context of *Kurikulum Merdeka* implementation, especially in relation to the principles of Focus, Alignment, and Flexibility. This approach enables a more comprehensive mapping of curriculum leadership as a strategic and contextual process in realizing grassroots-level education reform.

2. METHODS

This study uses an interpretive qualitative approach with an interpretive qualitative interview study design to explore the experiences and interpretations of school principals in reforming the curriculum based on central government policies (Hatch, 2002; Stake, 2010). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to gain insight into stakeholder engagement practices in curriculum reform through "unique" descriptions from key informants (Stake, 2010).

The study was conducted in three former residency areas in Central Java: Semarang, Pati, and Pekalongan. We contacted 15 schools (elementary, junior high, and senior high schools) and obtained consent to participate from 9 principals (3 elementary schools, 3 junior high schools, 3 senior high schools). All principals agreed voluntarily after receiving an explanation of the purpose and benefits of the study. The average age of participants was 35–45 years, with almost 70% having a master's degree

in education. The informant criteria included: having served as a principal for at least 5 years, before becoming a principal, having graduated as a leading teacher, and having experience managing a public school with limited resources under the supervision of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The sampling used was purposive sampling to ensure the credibility of the findings and to obtain the principals' perceptions from various perspectives (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2013). The selection based on the above criteria also aimed to capture curriculum reform practices in schools with similar resource characteristics.

Prior to the interview, the researcher contacted the principals to explain the nature and purpose of the study (Seidman, 2006). Principals who agreed then signed a consent form after receiving a written explanation regarding confidentiality and data use. The interview schedule was negotiated together to ensure participant readiness. A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the literature on curriculum reform and education management. Questions were open-ended to encourage dialogue and depth (Patton, 2002). Prior to the interview, participants were asked to read the guide in order to prepare reflections on their practices. Interviews were conducted by telephone with an average duration of 30 minutes per session. A conversational interview approach was applied to build personal bonds while maintaining researcher neutrality so that participants felt comfortable and not intimidated (Patton, 2002). All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and supplemented with field notes. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to obtain detailed responses and an appropriate cultural context.

Each interview recording was transcribed verbatim. The main researcher conducted the transcription in Indonesia. Thematic content analysis was applied by following the stages of (Miles et al., 2014). The first step is to mark (code) the data based on the discourse and meaning that emerged. After that, codes containing similar substances were grouped into categories to generalize the meaning (Miles et al., 2014). All data translated into English were done by two authors who are fluent in both languages (Bahasa and English). Only the translated results are presented in this article. The translation process followed the back translation procedure to ensure the accuracy of the meaning. Triangulation was applied at two levels, namely investigator triangulation where two independent researchers conducted coding and initial interpretation separately, then compared and discussed the differences until reaching an agreement. source triangulation (data triangulation) although the main focus was the interview, data validation was also carried out by involving two education management experts and qualitative researchers to review the interpretation results. Both experts provided feedback on the accuracy of the analysis and interpretation, and ensured the consistency of the findings. This triangulation stage ensures that the resulting themes confirm the validity of the research findings and minimize researcher bias (Patton, 2002; Koelsch, 2013).

Internal validity (credibility) was strengthened through researcher triangulation and source triangulation, namely, the principal as informant and the experts as validators. In addition, member checking was conducted by asking participants to check whether the researcher's report accurately captured their perceptions (Koelsch, 2013). A description of the research context (location, participant background, school characteristics) was detailed so that readers could assess the extent to which the findings could be applied to other contexts. An audit trail documentation (research journal, field notes, full transcripts, data codes, inter-researcher discussions) was kept to allow for retrieval of the analysis process. All analytical decisions were recorded transparently. Written consent was obtained before the interviews. Participants were assured of confidentiality: names and institutional identities were not explicitly published; data were anonymized. All recordings and transcripts were stored in a password-protected folder on the researcher's computer. These ethical procedures were approved by the institution's ethics committee. Participation was voluntary, and participants could discontinue involvement at any time without any consequences.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Classroom Level Mediation

Based on interview results from school principals in Region 1 (Semarang Residency), Region 2 (Pati Residency), and Region 3 (Ex Pekalongan Residency), the implementation of class level mediation at elementary, junior high, and senior high school levels reflects adaptive efforts in applying the three core principles outlined in the policy instrument: Focus, Alignment, and Flexibility. These principles are manifested in indicators such as student centered curriculum planning, alignment between instruction and assessment, and the ability to adapt the curriculum to student characteristics, school vision, and local contexts.

At the elementary school level, the approach tends to be simple and contextual, considering limited resources and the number of teachers. Principals generally emphasize the integration of the school vision through character education and project-based activities relevant to students' lives. The Focus principle becomes dominant at this level, especially in the form of student-centered learning and daily literacy practices. This is reflected in the following statements from elementary school principals:

"The principal ensures the school vision is integrated into the learning process through character strengthening and projects suited to students' needs." (Semarang Residency).

"Through teacher coaching to create creative and enjoyable learning, with a focus on student engagement." (Pati Residency).

"Through literacy activities integrated into pre-instructional routines." (Ex Pekalongan Residency).

All three regions indicate that at the elementary level, class-level mediation is dominated by the Focus principle, namely, student-centered learning and daily literacy activities. However, the literacy numeracy aspect in the Pati region appears less prominent compared to the other two regions. Student centered learning positions learners as active agents in knowledge construction. Nonetheless, implementation of the Alignment and Flexibility principles remains limited, as there is little evidence of structured assessments or data-based differentiated instruction. The approach remains largely simple, contextual, and tailored to the resource conditions of elementary schools.

At the junior high school level, there is a stronger consistency in implementing all three principles. Principals actively form curriculum development teams, conduct teacher training, and encourage differentiated instruction. The Focus principle is applied through competency-based and active learning approaches, while Alignment and Flexibility are reflected in efforts to align the curriculum with student characteristics through meaningful assessments and reflective teaching. Junior high schools emerge as the most balanced level in applying all principles and indicators in a structured manner. This is reflected in the following statements from junior high school principals:

"Teachers are given the freedom to choose teaching methods according to student characteristics. The principal promotes active and innovative learning that emphasizes the process rather than just outcomes." (Semarang Residency).

"Through understanding the philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum, teacher training, and classroom observations to evaluate the implementation of differentiation and student-centered learning." (Pati Residency).

"The principal organizes internal training on Differentiated Instruction, formative and summative assessment, and implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile (P5)." (Ex Pekalongan Residency).

At the senior high school level, the implementation of principles is more evident in terms of flexibility and autonomy. Principals provide greater space for teachers in designing teaching modules, adapting instructional strategies to student needs, and integrating values from the Pancasila Student

Profile. Collaborative approaches are conducted with external parties such as local education departments and community stakeholders. However, the application of the Focus principle, especially concerning literacy and numeracy reinforcement, is not uniformly articulated by all informants.

"The principal provides regular training and mentoring, and collaborates with teacher teams to ensure contextual and flexible teaching materials. Teachers are given autonomy to choose teaching strategies that suit students' conditions, along with strengthened support for project-based instructional tools." (Semarang Residency).

"Learning plans are based on the Pancasila Student Profile... followed by regular evaluation and reflection." (Pati Residency).

"Before preparing teaching modules, teachers are expected to map students' learning needs by considering learning profiles, readiness, and interests." (Ex Pekalongan Residency).

Table 1. Summary of Class Level Mediation Findings by Level and Region

Level	Region	Implementation of Principles
SD	Semarang	Vision integration through character building and relevant projects.
	Pati	Teacher coaching for creative, engaging instruction with a focus on student participation.
	Pekalongan	Literacy embedded before learning sessions; intensive teacher mentoring.
SMP	Semarang	Teacher autonomy in method selection; active learning; curriculum team formation.
	Pati	Teacher training and classroom observation for differentiation and meaningful assessment.
	Pekalongan	Routine workshops for differentiation, literacy, and IKM assessment guidance.
SMA	Semarang	Teacher autonomy in module development; integration of the Pancasila Profile; regular mentoring.
	Pati	Learning plans based on Pancasila Profile; regular evaluation and reflection.
	Pekalongan	Student-characteristic-based modules; learning needs mapping before planning.

Based on the summary in Table 1, at the elementary level, class-level mediation strategies are simple and focus on an easily understood vision, implemented through character development and local projects that enhance student engagement and critical thinking. At the junior high level, formative assessments that foster meaningful and sustainable learning contribute to improving students' self-regulated learning. At the senior high school level, instructional modules are based on student characteristics with prior needs-mapping.

Che Mat & Jamaludin (2024) emphasize that student-centered learning enhances academic achievement, critical thinking, and motivation through inquiry-based learning and group collaboration. Veugen et al. (2024) found that formative assessment fosters meaningful and sustained learning while improving students' self-regulation.

Policy recommendation: there is a need to strengthen data-based assessment capacity at the elementary level and reinforce the role of school supervisors and inspectors to provide technical guidance to elementary school principals. This will ensure that flexibility is reflected not only in contextualized curricula but also in measurable literacy-numeracy achievement indicators.

3.2. School Level Mediation

Based on interview results from the three regions at the elementary school (SD), junior high school (SMP), and senior high school (SMA) levels, the principles of school level mediation have been applied, such as aligning the school's vision with local contexts, ongoing support and evaluation, and both internal and external collaboration, although implementation varies based on to the educational level and available resources.

At the elementary school (SD) level, the strategies employed tend to be simple and focus on formulating a vision that is easy for all school members to understand. Elementary school principals

typically integrate the vision through character based and project based learning approaches that directly accommodate local conditions. Although limited resources and staff necessitate simpler methods, internal dissemination efforts are still effective in ensuring that learning activities align with the established goals.

According to the collected data, for the elementary school level across the three regions, the strategies applied are indeed relatively simple, emphasizing the formulation of a school vision that is understandable to all school members and integrated through character and project-based learning tailored to local contexts. For instance, in Region 1 (Semarang Residency), one interviewee stated:

"The principal ensures that the school vision is integrated into the learning process through character reinforcement and projects aligned with students' needs."

This statement illustrates that at the elementary school (SD) level, principals strive to create a vision that serves not only as a planning foundation but is also internalized into every learning activity to directly accommodate students' needs.

In contrast, in Region 2 (Pati Residency) and Region 3 (former Pekalongan Residency), although there were no explicit quotes detailing the vision integration process at the elementary level, the instruments and overall interview data indicate that the strategies used in both regions follow a similar pattern. The approaches in these elementary school (SD) emphasize simple internal dissemination, such as through meetings and concise planning documents, ensuring that the school vision is understood and internalized by all members despite limited resources and small teaching staff.

Overall, although stronger direct evidence was found in Region 1, the data suggests that all three regions employ strategies at the elementary school (SD) level that prioritize a vision that is simple but fundamental, adapted to internal school conditions and limitations, aiming to ensure that each learning activity aligns with the defined vision and goals.

At the junior high school (SMP) level, there is a tendency for the principles to be implemented in a more structured manner through the establishment of curriculum development teams and learning communities. This is evident in the efforts of school principals who actively organize internal training sessions, provide mentoring, and facilitate discussion forums to evaluate and adapt teaching materials in accordance with student characteristics and local dynamics. For instance, one informant from Region 1 stated, *"The principal ensures that the teaching modules are developed in line with the philosophy of the Kurikulum Merdeka and aligned with students' needs and interests."*

This indicates that the preparation and evaluation of learning materials are carried out systematically with teacher involvement.

In Region 2 (Pati Residency), an informant conveyed that support and evaluation are conducted through regular monitoring and internal training that emphasize the importance of adapting content to changes in student characteristics:

"The principal conducts regular monitoring through learning achievement evaluations, including mentoring and internal training for teachers."

This demonstrates the presence of a strong support structure.

Meanwhile, in Region 3 (former Pekalongan Residency), the collaborative strategy is also evident, as an informant noted:

"We hold regular workshops and discussion forums to ensure that the teaching materials developed are truly aligned with student characteristics and local dynamics."

This underscores that the collaborative approach, involving all stakeholders such as teachers and school committees, makes curriculum implementation more responsive to existing challenges. At the senior high school (SMA) level, principals demonstrate a higher level of autonomy and flexibility in curriculum design. At this level, there is intensive involvement with external parties, such as the education department and the society, along with the use of digital media to socialize the school vision.

A collaborative and structured evaluation approach provides teachers with space to develop innovative learning materials while ensuring that curriculum policy implementation proceeds sustainably.

In Region 1 (Semarang Residency), an SMA principal stated:

"The school gives teachers the flexibility to engage in activities that enhance their competence and also establish learning communities that provide a space for teachers to share best practices within learning community activities through cycles of identification, reflection, implementation, and evaluation."

This demonstrates the autonomy given to teachers to innovate and involve them in reflective and evaluative structures.

From Region 2 (Pati Residency), evidence of autonomy and cross-stakeholder involvement is shown through the statements:

"The school is given the flexibility to independently develop the curriculum based on regional potential and needs," and "With the division of roles and responsibilities in curriculum implementation agreed upon by all school stakeholders."

This affirms that SMA principals in this region promote high flexibility in local potential-based curriculum with collaborative processes involving all parties.

Meanwhile, in Region 3 (former Pekalongan Residency), an SMA principal explained:

"My strategy for socializing national curriculum policies is to simplify policy content into infographics, concise modules, and real life examples that are easily understood by teachers and parents," and "I also organize forums such as regular meetings, workshops, and best practice sharing sessions."

This shows the use of digital media as a socialization tool and a collaborative approach to ensure curriculum implementation continuity.

Table 2. Summary of School Level Mediation Findings

Level	Region	Principle Implementation
SD	Semarang	Character and local needs based vision, socialized through meetings and routines.
	Pati	Simple internal socialization (meetings, brief documents) for vision internalization.
	Pekalongan	Environmental SWOT analysis, socialization meetings with teachers, students, and staff.
SMP	Semarang	Curriculum development team, learning communities, training and regular monitoring.
	Pati	Continuous monitoring, internal training, reflective evaluation.
	Pekalongan	Routine IHT/workshops; learning communities; periodic evaluation with management team.
SMA	Semarang	Autonomy in KOSP, structured learning communities, external collaboration, support.
	Pati	Full policy flexibility, structured role division, multi stakeholder forums.
	Pekalongan	Cross-school collaboration (MKKS, KKG), socialization involving committee & parents.

Based on the findings in Table 2, it can be seen that at the elementary school (SD) level, class level mediation strategies are simple, focusing on a vision that is easy to understand through character reinforcement and local projects. At the juniro high school (SMP) level, the formation of curriculum teams and professional learning communities (PLC) enhances teacher collaboration, while formative assessment promotes meaningful and sustainable learning, boosting students' self regulated learning. At the senior high school (SMA) level, teacher autonomy emerges through interdisciplinary curriculum profiles that foster creativity, influenced by teacher professionalism and individual culture, and strengthened by school community partnerships that provide external support.

Kin & Kareem (2021) and Vitriyana et al., (2025) state that the success of PLCs depends on MGMP forums and adequate time allocation for discussion. Junior high schools (SMP) in Semarang and Pekalongan have implemented effective MGMP and learning communities.

Policy implications: A national guideline needs to be established regarding the development of context based visions oriented toward SWOT analysis at all levels to make the process be more measurable and replicable across other regions. Furthermore, policy should encourage the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) as a platform for teacher collaboration.

3.3. City or District Level Mediation

Based on interviews from the three regions (Region 1 Semarang Residency, Region 2 Pati Residency, and Region 3 Former Pekalongan Residency), the implementation of City/District Level Mediation focused primarily on the principles of Flexibility and Mutual Cooperation (Gotong Royong) across all education levels. Indicators included the principals' ability to foster cross school and community collaboration, as well as aligning the school's vision with local cultural values.

At the elementary school level (SD), collaboration and communication were limited in scale and tended to be internal or community-based, such as with school committees and parents. Elementary principals utilized socialization activities and committee meetings as means to engage with the community and communicate the school vision.

"The school invites parents and the school committee to socialize school programs." (Former Pekalongan Residency)

The principle of Mutual Cooperation was evident through committee involvement, but flexibility was still limited since elementary schools generally had not engaged in active cross-school or district-level collaboration.

At the junior high school level (SMP), the application of Mutual Cooperation and Flexibility had expanded. Principals built partnerships with local education offices and other schools through forums such as MGMP (Subject Teacher Working Groups), KKG (Teacher Working Groups), or professional learning communities, and actively involved the community in learning program alignment.

"Training needs are determined based on curriculum implementation evaluations and discussions within teacher learning communities." (Semarang Residency)

This level showed more active and reflective city-level mediation, mapping teacher training needs based on regional context and involving diverse stakeholders.

At the senior high school level (SMA), collaboration with external parties was stronger. Principals formed partnerships with education offices, MKKS (High School Principal Forums), local communities, and involved parents in curriculum evaluations. Schools also began using technology and social media to disseminate school programs and vision more broadly.

"We collaborate with education offices and external institutions in the form of training and program partnerships." (Semarang Residency)

Implementation of Flexibility and Mutual Principle was most evident at this level. Principals engaged in cross-school, cross-sector collaboration and utilized digital media to amplify school vision communication strategically.

Table 3. Summary of City/District Level Mediation Findings by Level and Region

Level	Region	Implementation of Principles
SD	Semarang	Internal socialization (committees, parents), community events.
	Pati	Parent & committee invitations, socialization meetings.
	Pekalongan	Collaboration via MKKS and K3S, parent involvement, outreach.
SMP	Semarang	MGMP, learning communities, education office involvement in training.
	Pati	Local learning communities, training based on evaluations.
	Pekalongan	MKKS forums, KKG activities, joint training, culturally based collaboration.
SMA	Semarang	Formal partnerships with education offices, MKKS, universities, digital media use.
	Pati	MKKS forums, multi-stakeholder task distribution, curriculum flexibility.
	Pekalongan	Partnerships with education offices, MKKS, committees; hybrid meetings (offline/online).

Findings from Table 3 indicate that at the elementary level, city/district-level mediation remains simple and focused on internal communication through school committees and program outreach. Mutual Cooperation is fostered through joint activities with teachers, parents, and the surrounding community, though still limited to the immediate environment. At the junior high level, the establishment of MGMP and professional learning communities facilitates teacher collaboration. Teacher participation in MGMP enhances pedagogical competence through routine discussions and joint training. Learning communities foster teacher professionalism through accessible training and dedicated discussion time. At the senior high level, school public relations teams applied media relations strategies, formal partnerships with education offices, universities, and external agencies, and utilized digital platforms to expand flexibility and collaboration among stakeholders. Systematic school community partnerships enhanced the quality of educational services.

Mulditasari & Noviani (2023) emphasized that systematic school community partnerships can improve educational service quality. This has already been implemented by senior high schools in Semarang and Pekalongan. The use of social media (digital media relations) in Semarang aligns with Afrianti & Viona's (2024) recommendation that schools leverage digital platforms to strengthen the dissemination of school vision.

3.4. National Level Mediation

Based on interview results from the three regions (Region 1 Semarang Residency, Region 2 Pati Residency, and Region 3 Former Pekalongan Residency), in the sub focus of national level mediation, it is evident that the implementation of three core principles Flexibility, Mutual Cooperation (Gotong Royong), and Simplicity & Sustainability, is a central focus across all levels of education. The main indicators considered are the school principals' ability to simplify national policies to make them easily understood by all school members, ensure continuity of implementation, and establish cross-sector collaboration involving the education department, external institutions, and the community. At the elementary school (SD) level, implementation of national level mediation remains internal and simple. Elementary school principals attempt to communicate national policies through accessible methods such as regular meetings with school committees and parents and the use of print media (e.g., flyers). As stated by an SD principal in Region 3 (Former Pekalongan Residency):

"At the elementary level, simplification of national policies is carried out through routine socialization activities with the school committee and parents, although collaboration with external parties such as the education office is not yet intensive."

The application of the principle of flexibility is visible through the effort to adapt learning materials to the school's potential and conditions. However, external involvement to support policy sustainability remains very limited.

At the junior high school (SMP) level, national mediation implementation shows more significant progress. Principals have begun to expand collaboration not only within the internal school environment but also with external parties such as the education office and other schools. Through forums like MGMP (Subject Teacher Working Groups), learning communities, and mentoring activities, teachers receive training and periodic evaluations to ensure alignment between national policies and school vision. As described by an SMP principal in Region 1 (Semarang Residency):

“Training needs are determined based on curriculum implementation evaluations and discussions within the teacher learning community.”

Indicators of mediation at this level show improvements in the practical communication of policies and efforts to ensure sustainability through regular monitoring, although cross-sector cooperation is still in the strengthening phase.

The implementation of national mediation principles at the senior high school (SMA) level is more comprehensive and strategic. Principals at the SMA level are able to simplify national policies into applicable materials through the use of infographics, concise modules, and the utilization of digital media to communicate the school vision. In addition, cross sector collaboration has expanded, with active involvement from the education department, MKKS (Senior High School Principal Working Group), government institutions, and the local community. As stated by an SMA principal in Region 1 (Semarang Residency):

“Building partnerships with the education office and external institutions through training and program collaborations is a key strategy.”

At the SMA level, national mediation indicators are reflected in ongoing evaluations, intensive teacher mentoring, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders in aligning learning programs, ensuring consistent and comprehensive implementation of national policies.

Table 4. Summary of National Level Mediation Findings

Level	Region	Principle Implementation
SD	Semarang	Policy dissemination through committee meetings and print media (flyers).
	Pati	Routine socialization with the committee and parents; posters/flyers.
	Pekalongan	Infographics, concise modules, articles in school media.
SMP	Semarang	MGMP forums for policy content; online modules for teachers.
	Pati	Training and mentoring based on implementation evaluations.
	Pekalongan	Interactive infographics, webinars, virtual meetings with provincial education office.
SMA	Semarang	Infographics, concise modules, partnerships with teacher training institutions (LPTK), use of social media.
	Pati	Flyers, banners, regular workshops, multi stakeholder forums.
	Pekalongan	Infographics, concise modules, use of provincial MKKS platform.

Based on the summary of findings in Table 4, at the SD level, national level mediation is simple and focuses on simplifying national policies through routine socialization with school committees and parents using meetings and printed materials such as flyers. At the SMP level, national mediation has evolved through MGMP forums, learning communities, and periodic mentoring that maps training needs based on evaluations of national policy implementation. At the SMA level, school public relations simplifies national policies into applicable infographics and concise modules, utilize digital media for broad communication, and establishes cross-sector collaboration with the education department, MKKS, government institutions, and the local community.

Zulfa et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of infographics and concise modules to make national policies easy to understand. The findings in SMA Semarang have aligned with this, while Pati and Pekalongan still rely on flyers and banners. To ensure the sustainability of policy, Hentihu et al. (2022) recommend regular evaluation forums.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study, which incorporated insights from principals of elementary (SD), junior high (SMP), and senior high (SMA) schools alongside a theoretical review of curriculum leadership, indicate that the effective implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* is largely determined by the principal's capacity to mediate and translate educational policies across the classroom, school, district/city, and national levels. This mediation is achieved through the consistent application of key principles—simplicity, focus, flexibility, alignment, and mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*)—which enable the synchronization of national educational goals with local needs and potentials. Principals who successfully integrate these principles demonstrate the ability to foster adaptive, inclusive, and collaborative learning environments. Nonetheless, the study identifies a limitation in that elementary schools exhibit weaker external collaboration networks compared to their junior and senior high counterparts, suggesting uneven leadership capacity across levels. Given this limitation, future initiatives should prioritize leadership development programs specifically designed for elementary school principals, emphasizing policy mediation skills and context-sensitive decision-making. Further research is also recommended to explore how different contextual factors—such as local governance structures and community engagement—affect curriculum leadership effectiveness, thereby strengthening the sustainable and equitable implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* nationwide.

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