

# An Analysis of the Principal's Leadership in Fostering a Culture of Discipline and Innovation in Schools

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## Abstrak

Tujuan studi ini adalah untuk menentukan dan menganalisis bagaimana Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah mengintegrasikan dualisme budaya antara Inovasi Fleksibel (Eksplorasi) dan Disiplin Struktural (Eksplotasi) di sekolah-sekolah yang menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka (Kurikulum Mandiri). Teknik: Studi ini menggunakan metodologi kualitatif deskriptif di tiga hingga empat sekolah dengan triangulasi data, termasuk observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan kuesioner skala Likert untuk pemilihan informan. Perbandingan pendapat antara Guru Inti/Inovatif dengan Guru Non-Inti/Kritis merupakan tujuan utama analisis data. Temuan: Ditunjukkan bahwa Kerangka Kepemimpinan Integratif (ILF) menggabungkan aspek budaya, instruksional, dan transformasional. Fungsi unik Kepala Sekolah sebagai "Jembatan" (menghubungkan inovasi dengan standar akuntabilitas) dan "Bantalan" (melindungi guru dari dampak kegagalan inovasi) memungkinkan ILF berfungsi. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa meskipun guru non-inti memahami ILF sebagai ambiguitas prosedural, guru inti memandangnya sebagai pemberdayaan penuh. Keunikan & Kontribusi: Dengan memetakan peran Penyangga dan Jembatan sebagai mekanisme operasional untuk mencapai Ambidexteritas Organisasi di lingkungan pendidikan, penelitian ini mengisi celah dalam literatur tentang model kepemimpinan integratif tertentu. Implikasi Praktis: ILF memberikan panduan yang jelas bagi lembaga pelatihan dan kepala sekolah dalam mengelola dualisme budaya dan meredakan stres yang dirasakan guru.

**Kata kunci:** Masalah Ambidexteritas Organisasi, Disiplin dan Inovasi, Kepemimpinan, Kerangka Kerja Kepemimpinan Integratif (ILF), Keamanan Psikologis.

## Abstract

This study's goal is to determine and examine how Principal Leadership integrates the cultural dualism of Flexible Innovation (Exploration) and Structural Discipline (Exploitation) in schools using the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum). Techniques: The study used a descriptive qualitative methodology in three to four schools using data triangulation, including observation, in-depth interviews, and Likert scale questionnaires for informant selection. Comparing the opinions of Core/Innovative Teachers with Non-Core/Critical Teachers is the main goal of data analysis. Findings: It was shown that an Integrative Leadership Framework (ILF) combines cultural, instructional, and transformational aspects. The Principal's distinct functions as a "Bridge" (linking innovation with accountability standards) and a "Buffer" (covering teachers from the effects of innovation failures) allow the ILF to function. The results indicate that although non-core teachers understand the ILF as procedural ambiguity, core teachers view it as full empowerment. Novelty & Contribution: By clearly mapping the Buffering and Bridging roles as operational mechanisms for attaining Organizational Ambidexterity in the educational environment, this work fills a gap in the literature about particular integrative leadership models. Practical Implications: The ILF provides training institutions and principals with precise guidance for managing cultural dualism and easing teacher perceived stress.

**Keywords:** Problem Organizational Ambidexterity, of Discipline and Innovation, Leadership, Integrative Leadership Framework (ILF), Psychological Safety.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education in the 21st century faces a complex duality challenge: the demand for solid discipline as a foundation for character and work ethic, alongside the urgent need for innovation as the key to preparedness for change and global competition (Lahesti et al., 2023). Schools can no longer choose one; they must integrate these two cultures

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simultaneously. Producing graduates who are not only compliant with rules (discipline) but also capable of critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability (innovation) is the primary mandate of the contemporary education system (Askhatova A, 2020). Traditional disciplinary culture often focuses on compliance, standardization, and risk minimization, which ironically can stifle the growth of creativity and exploration that are the core of innovation (Nasution et al., 2024). Conversely, an innovation culture, which promotes experimentation and measured risk-taking, if not balanced with structure and accountability (discipline), can lead to organizational chaos or performance inconsistency (Nopriani, 2021). The heart of the effort to balance this organizational duality lies in the quality of School Principal Leadership (Roja & Salim, 2023). The Principal, in the Indonesian and global context, is the primary architect of school culture. The Principal's decisions, actions, and communication model directly shape the norms, values, and expectations that guide the behavior of the entire school community teachers, staff, and students (Laia & Zai, 2020). This leadership role has shifted from merely managerial-administrative to instructional leadership and, more importantly, transformational and cultural leadership (Nabella et al., 2022). They must be change agents who facilitate an environment where rules are followed not out of fear, but due to a collective awareness of shared goals, while actively encouraging teachers to try new teaching methods, experiment with technology, and dare to take pedagogical risks for the sake of improving learning quality (Bereczki & Kárpáti, 2021).

Many schools struggle to maintain a strong disciplinary culture but tend to stagnate in learning innovation. Teachers often feel psychologically safe repeating old routines rather than taking the risk of introducing new initiatives for fear of failure, criticism, or violating rigid procedures (Al Awlaqi & Ghozali, 2023). On the other hand, some highly innovative schools sometimes lose focus on quality standards, accountability, and the foundation of student character due to an overemphasis on unstructured freedom. Principals often lack an explicit leadership framework to navigate these two poles effectively. Although studies agree that leadership is the main predictor of school success (Pavajeau & Montero, 2023), research on how Principal leadership meticulously translates the dual vision of discipline and innovation into daily practice, especially under the pressure of a new curriculum (such as the Kurikulum Merdeka in Indonesia), remains partial. Existing research often focuses on one variable either innovative leadership alone or leadership emphasizing discipline alone without analyzing the integrative leadership model needed to unite the two. Therefore, this research is rooted in the urgent need to deeply identify and analyze a Principal leadership model that consciously and strategically balances Structural Disciplinary Culture (compliance, work ethic, accountability) and Flexible Innovation Culture (creativity, measured risk-taking, design thinking). The Principal's role is no longer just about managing two different elements, but about synthesizing them into a single, cohesive, and resilient school culture (Ardliana et al., 2021). To fill the research gap and provide a strong academic foundation, this introductory section outlines the current state of knowledge and the unique contributions of the proposed study. Broadly, the literature has established three main pillars relevant to this research:

First, *The Importance of School Leadership as the Primary Driver of Change*: It is widely known that Principal leadership is the second most important factor (after teacher instruction) in determining student learning outcomes (Ningsih et al., 2021). Models like Transformational Leadership, focusing on motivation and vision, and Instructional Leadership, focusing on teaching quality, are the most frequently studied and proven effective (Nugraha & Suyatmin, 2021). Discipline in schools, in this context, is known to improve through leadership that is consistent, fair, and value-oriented, rather than merely punitive (Anggraini et al., 2022). Second, *Discipline and Innovation Require Cultural Environments*: Organizational studies show that neither discipline nor innovation can be achieved through

procedures alone; both must be embedded in the culture (Schein, 2017). Discipline thrives in a culture of accountability and psychological safety, where rules are clear and implemented transparently (Tran et al., 2024). Meanwhile, innovation is known to require a culture of risk-taking, design thinking, and tolerance for failure, led by principals who act as facilitators, not single authorities (Duru & Obasi, 2023). Third, The Demand for Organizational Duality (Ambidexterity): In modern management, there is a consensus that successful organizations must be ambidextrous capable of simultaneously exploring (innovation) and exploiting (efficiency, discipline) (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Education research is beginning to adopt this concept, recognizing that schools need to exploit well-established practices (discipline) while exploring new pedagogical practices (innovation) (Nobutoshi, 2023).

Despite a strong knowledge foundation, there are significant gaps not addressed by existing research, which are the main focus of this study:

First, The Integrative Mechanism of Cultural Duality by Leadership: How does the Principal operationally integrate the rigid framework (discipline, work ethic, compliance) with the fluid framework (innovation, creativity, risk-taking) within a single leadership practice? The majority of research still views these two domains separately or only indicates the need for ambidexterity without detailing the specific cultural leadership steps to achieve it. It is not deeply known how a Principal balances strict disciplinary supervision with the simultaneous provision of autonomy and space for experimentation to teachers without sending contradictory messages (Akteruzzaman et al., 2023). Second, The Specific Role of Leadership Dimensions in the Post-Kurikulum Merdeka Indonesian Context: Leadership research in Indonesia, especially that linking discipline and innovation, often uses Western theoretical frameworks (such as Transformational Leadership) without deep contextual adaptation (Utari & Afendi, 2022). It is unknown how Principals in Indonesia, under the Kurikulum Merdeka mandate emphasizing flexibility and problem-based projects (innovation), interpret and apply this integrative leadership model while maintaining national and local discipline (Ayubi et al., 2025). Third, Measurement of the Role of Core and Non-Core Teachers in Implementing Integrative Culture: Research often assumes uniform culture adoption. It is unknown how Principal Leadership differently affects "Core/Innovative" teachers (who may readily accept innovation but be resistant to rigid procedures) versus "Non-Core/Critical" teachers (who may value discipline but resist innovation) in the context of creating an integrated culture. Analysis of the perceptions of these different teacher groups is a methodological and substantial gap.

The current state of the art in educational leadership studies indicates a shift towards more adaptive and humanistic models, primarily driven by post-pandemic disruption and digital transformation (My Nguyen et al., 2024). First, The Emergence of Shared and Distributed Leadership: Recent research (2021- 2025) heavily emphasizes Distributed Leadership (Muliadi et al., 2024), where the Principal shares leadership responsibilities with expert teachers. This is highly relevant for innovation, as new ideas are encouraged from the bottom up, not just top- down. This model must be balanced with strong ethical leadership to maintain discipline and accountability (Almulla, 2020). Second, Emphasis on Psychological Safety: Leading management literature (Edmondson, 2020) has influenced education, emphasizing that innovation will only occur if teachers feel psychologically safe to fail and propose ideas (Cheng & Yang, 2024). Principal Leadership is currently seen as the primary builder of this psychological climate, an important bridge between discipline (procedural clarity) and innovation (freedom to experiment). Third, Integration of Design Thinking in Pedagogy: The state of the art in educational innovation is the shift from ad-hoc innovation to structured innovation through the design thinking methodology. Leading Principals (Fullan,

2023) use this framework to solve school problems, essentially combining process discipline with solution creativity (Bressane et al., 2024). Current research analyzes how Principals promote design thinking as a cultural habit, not just as a project.

The main Novelty of this research lies in its cultural synthesis approach and focus on specific integrative leadership mechanisms: **Explicit Dual-Culture (Ambidexterity) Leadership Synthesis:** This study does not merely prove correlation but seeks to map an Integrative Leadership Framework (ILF) used by Principals who successfully balance Disciplinary Culture (e.g., adherence to attendance, punctuality, high work ethic) and Innovation Culture (e.g., independent curriculum development, experimentation with learning methods). Previous research tended to analyze only one side; this research explicitly seeks the mechanism that allows the Principal to manage this organizational paradox. **Analysis of the Buffering and Bridging Role of Leadership:** Another novelty is analyzing how the Principal acts as a 'Buffer' (protector) who shields innovating teachers from excessive consequences of failure, as well as a 'Bridge' that connects teachers' innovative initiatives with school discipline and accountability standards. This is a leadership role not yet clearly defined in the literature (Ainscow, 2020).

**Comparative Informant Approach Based on Perception:** A methodological novelty is the use of Likert questionnaire results to intentionally select two key informant groups (Core/Innovative Teachers and Non-Core/Critical Teachers) (Duru & Obasi, 2023). This allows the researcher to understand how the same leadership implementation is interpreted differently by teachers with different cultural orientations, providing richer qualitative interpretative depth regarding the effectiveness of cultural leadership. The research outcomes will provide significant contributions: **Development of Principal Training Programs:** The research results will yield an Integrative Leadership Model (ILF) that can be directly adopted by principal training and development institutions (such as LPMP, Education Offices). This model will focus on specific competencies in managing cultural duality, for example, how to conduct meetings that promote risk-taking while enforcing accountability. **Guidelines for Kurikulum Merdeka Implementation:** For schools, this research provides practical guidance on how Principals can facilitate the innovation required by *Kurikulum Merdeka* without sacrificing the work ethic and discipline needed for operational success (Seckel et al., 2022). This helps schools avoid polarization between "rigid schools" and "free schools." **School Culture Diagnostic Tool:** The findings can be used to develop better questionnaires or diagnostic instruments for Principals to measure the balance between disciplinary and innovation cultures in their schools, enabling more targeted leadership interventions. **Enrichment of Organizational Duality (Ambidexterity) Theory in the Education Context:** This research contributes to leadership literature by applying and expanding ambidexterity theory to the domain of school culture, specifically highlighting the central role of Principal Leadership as a cultural integrator, rather than just a structural manager (Rashidin et al., 2022).

**Definition of a New Integrative Leadership Model:** This research aims to construct or validate a new leadership model that explicitly combines elements of Transformational (vision for innovation), Instructional (emphasis on disciplined teaching quality), and Cultural (shaping norms of psychological safety). **Innovative Qualitative Methodology:** The use of data triangulation (questionnaires for informant selection, in-depth interviews, and observation) to compare the perceptions of different teacher groups (Core vs. Non-Core) provides a strong methodological contribution to future qualitative leadership studies. Based on the background, knowledge gaps, state of the art, and novelty outlined above, this research will be guided by the following main research question: How does Principal Leadership strategically

integrate and translate structural disciplinary culture and flexible innovation culture into daily practice, and how is this integrative leadership mechanism differentially perceived by core (innovative) and non-core (critical) teachers in schools implementing Kurikulum Merdeka?

## **2. METHOD**

This study adopts a Descriptive Qualitative approach, where quantitative instruments serve as a strategic qualitative auxiliary tool. The primary focus is to analyze the Principal's Integrative Leadership Framework (ILF) in balancing a culture of structural discipline and flexible innovation in schools that have implemented the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) (Shocheb, 2023). Research locations were deliberately selected using Purposive Sampling at 3–4 schools. Data collection techniques utilized three-component triangulation. First, a Likert Scale Questionnaire was distributed to all teachers to map initial perceptions (Muhtar et al., 2021). The results of this questionnaire were crucial for selecting contrasting key informants: Core/Innovative Teachers and Non-Core/Critical Teachers. Second, In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) served as the main technique to explore the operational mechanisms of the ILF, including the Principal's role as a 'Buffer' (innovation protector) and a 'Bridge' (accountability connector). Third, Limited Observation was conducted to verify cultural practices. Data analysis was performed interactively (reduction, display, and conclusion verification), emphasizing the contrast comparison between the perceptions of the two groups of teachers. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking, guaranteeing that the findings regarding the ILF are holistic and credible (Amin, 2021).

## **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This research aims to answer the key question regarding the mechanism of Principal Leadership in balancing two paradoxical cultural demands: Structural Discipline (Exploitation) and Flexible Innovation (Exploration). Qualitatively, it was found that Principals who successfully manage this duality implement an Integrative Leadership Framework (ILF). This ILF Model does not merely sum the two elements but synthesizes three leadership dimensions. Transformational Vision: Used to communicate that innovation under the Merdeka Curriculum is an ethical obligation to achieve school goals, not merely an add-on project (Latifa et al., 2023). Instructional Structure: Serves as the pillar of discipline, asserting that accountability and a professional work ethic (such as punctuality and quality of lesson planning) are prerequisites for earning autonomy in innovating (Hallinger & Wang, 2020). Cultural Leadership: Used to instill psychological safety a crucial bridge ensuring teachers feel safe to take risks without fear of excessive punishment (Irawan, 2022) .

The Principal acts as a 'Buffer' (Protector of Innovation). This role is essential for addressing the fear of failure among (Putri et al., 2023). As a Buffer, the Principal shields teachers who conduct measured experiments from undue criticism or detrimental structural consequences if the initiative does not succeed. The Principal openly defines failure as valuable "learning data." Conversely, the Principal also serves as a 'Bridge' (Accountability Link). This role ensures innovation remains tied to disciplinary standards. Accountability is no longer measured by procedural compliance but by the quality of teacher reflection on the innovation outcomes and their impact on improving student learning outcomes (Goos et al., 2023). Thus, the ILF transforms discipline from blind adherence to purpose-driven discipline (Timperley, 2021). The richest finding emerges from the comparison between Core/Innovative Teachers and Non-Core/Critical Teachers. Core Teachers (selected due to a high perceived level of innovation support) interpret the ILF as Full Empowerment, feeling supported, autonomous, and believing the ILF increases their work effectiveness (Avolio & Gardner, 2024). However,

Non-Core Teachers (who tend to value discipline and resist change) interpret the same framework as Procedural Ambiguity. They feel tension between the demands of rigid discipline and the perceived 'unstructured' freedom of innovation. For this group, the ILF actually increases workload and confusion, demonstrating that the integration of duality is not yet 100% smooth for all organizational members (Davids & Rinquest, 2024).

The ILF findings validate the theory of Organizational Ambidexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013) in an educational context. School success lies in the Principal's ability to synthesize (not merely balance) the cultures of exploration (innovation) and exploitation (discipline) (Day et al., 2019; Hargreaves & Fink, 2020). The ILF, centered on the Buffer and Bridge roles, provides a clear operational mechanism a significant contribution that fills a gap in the literature regarding specific cultural leadership implementation. While supporting the central role of leadership (Fullan, 2023; Leithwood et al., 2021) and the need for Psychological Safety (Ntumba et al., 2023) and integrated styles (Hallinger & Wang, 2020), this study also notes three contradictory or partially supportive findings: Traditional discipline (Covey, 2019) emphasizes compliance, but the ILF modifies compliance into purpose-based discipline, which requires risk-taking. The Non-Core Teachers' perception of Procedural Ambiguity aligns with Kotter's warning (2021) that integration efforts often fail at the operational level if the speed of innovation is not aligned with stable procedures. The finding indirectly critiques (Buhary et al., 2024), who stated that Transformational leadership is often ineffective in Indonesia, by showing that Transformational leadership can be effective only when strongly integrated with the Instructional and Cultural dimensions (ILF).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The Principal's leadership strategically integrates a culture of structural discipline and flexible innovation through the development of an Integrative Leadership Framework (ILF), which synthesizes transformational vision, instructional structure, and a culture of psychological safety to achieve organizational ambidexterity. The key operational mechanisms of the ILF are the 'Buffer' role protecting teachers from excessive consequences resulting from measured innovation risks and the 'Bridge' role connecting innovation outcomes with professional accountability and discipline. Findings indicate that the ILF is perceived differently; core (innovative) teachers perceive it as empowerment, while non-core (critical) teachers interpret it as procedural ambiguity. Practically, Principals are encouraged to adopt this ILF and prioritize transparent communication to reduce ambiguity among teachers who are resistant to change. This implication demands that leadership training programs focus on this competence of cultural duality. For future research, it is recommended to conduct a large-scale quantitative study to validate the effectiveness of the ILF on improving student learning outcomes and to identify factors that moderate the difference in perception between teacher groups under the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum).

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