

The Influence of Merdeka Belajar Program Management on School Performance: A Case Study of State Elementary School 35 Talang Kelapa

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pengelolaan program Merdeka Belajar dan dampaknya terhadap kinerja sekolah di SDN 35 Talang Kelapa. Menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan kepala sekolah dan staf pengajar. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa manajemen program yang meliputi perencanaan, pelaksanaan, dan evaluasi dijalankan secara sistematis. Meskipun kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dan kreativitas guru mendorong keberhasilan program, tantangan tetap ada terkait keterbatasan fasilitas dan kedalaman pemahaman kurikulum. Secara keseluruhan, pengelolaan inisiatif yang efektif secara signifikan meningkatkan kualitas pembelajaran dan kinerja institusi.

Kata kunci: Kualitas Pembelajaran, Manajemen Pendidikan, Kinerja Sekolah Dasar, Program Merdeka Belajar

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the management of the Merdeka Belajar program and its impact on school performance at SDN 35 Talang Kelapa. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were gathered through interviews, observations, and documentation involving the principal and teaching staff. Findings indicate that program management comprising planning, implementation, and evaluation is executed systematically. While the principal's leadership and teacher creativity drive the program's success, challenges remain regarding facility limitations and the depth of curricular understanding. Overall, effective management of the initiative significantly enhances the quality of learning and institutional performance.

Keywords: Educational Management, Elementary School Performance, Learning Quality, Merdeka Belajar Program

1. INTRODUCTION

Education serves as the primary catalyst for national development, where the optimization of school performance is vital for producing high-quality human resources (Wahjusaputri, 2021; Hartini et al., 2024). In the Indonesian context, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) initiative to transform the educational landscape by emphasizing autonomy, flexibility, and student-centered learning (Hasdawaty, 2025; Masnawati & Darmawan, 2023). This policy requires schools to shift from rigid administrative compliance to innovative pedagogical practices. However, the success of such a paradigm shift heavily depends on robust educational management (Gustiani et al., 2023). Recent evidence suggests that without a structured managerial framework, the transition to decentralized curricula often faces operational stagnation, particularly in primary education (Saputra & Lestari, 2024).

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Theoretical foundations suggest that school performance is a multidimensional construct influenced by leadership, resource allocation, and strategic planning (Manduku, 2022). According to Mesra et al. (2024), strategic planning in schools acts as a roadmap that aligns institutional goals with national standards. In the framework of *Merdeka Belajar*, management must go beyond traditional oversight; it requires a transformative approach where the principal acts as a facilitator for teacher professional growth (Sultonova, 2023; Khanal & Guha, 2023). Moreover, the integration of digital-based management systems has become a non-negotiable prerequisite for enhancing administrative efficiency and teacher accountability in the post-pandemic era (Wibowo & Pratama, 2023; Sari et al., 2025). Previous studies have shown that when management is structured effectively incorporating planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation student achievement naturally improves (Arung et al., 2023; Musifuddin et al., 2024). This systematic approach ensures that educational goals are not only articulated but also measured through rigorous performance indicators (Hidayat, 2026).

Despite the government's push for this curriculum, a significant research gap exists. Most existing literature focuses on the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in urban centers or higher education institutions (Yusriadi et al., 2024; Rakhmani, 2023). There is limited empirical data regarding how this program is managed in suburban or semi-rural elementary schools, such as SDN 35 Talang Kelapa. Furthermore, the socio-economic disparities between urban and suburban schools often dictate the quality of curriculum delivery, necessitating a localized management model (Purnomo, 2024). While the conceptual benefits of "Freedom to Learn" are well-documented, the practical challenges of managing these changes at the primary level remain under-researched (Hunaepi, 2024). School leaders in these regions often face a "dual burden" of high administrative expectations paired with minimal technical support (Laksmi & Santoso, 2023). Many schools struggle with the transition due to a lack of technical guidance and insufficient infrastructure (Fadhillah, 2024; Prior et al., 2020).

The problem statement of this study centers on the inconsistency between policy expectations and the management capacity at the elementary level. At SDN 35 Talang Kelapa, while the program has been initiated, it is unclear how the management dimensions specifically planning and evaluation directly correlate with the overall school performance metrics. If management fails to adapt to the fluid nature of student-centered learning, the initiative risks being reduced to a "surface-level adoption" rather than a deep structural change (Utomo & Wijaya, 2025). Without a clear understanding of these dynamics, the program risks becoming a mere formality rather than a substantive educational reform (Nugroho, 2025; Pratomo, 2022). Furthermore, the lack of continuous evaluative feedback often leads to pedagogical drift, where the curriculum is implemented without clear learning outcomes (Rahayu et al., 2026).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the management of the *Merdeka Belajar* program and its subsequent effect on school performance. By identifying the strengths and weaknesses of current management practices, this research seeks to provide a model for similar elementary schools in navigating the complexities of the new curriculum. The importance of this study lies in its potential to offer data-driven insights for local education authorities to refine professional development programs for school leaders (Setiawan, 2024).

2. METHOD

This study utilizes a quantitative research design to objectively measure the relationship between the management of the Merdeka Belajar program and school performance. Quantitative methods are appropriate here as they allow for the statistical testing of hypotheses regarding how specific management dimensions planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation contribute to institutional outcomes (Manduku, 2022; Mesra et al., 2024). The adoption of a quantitative framework is essential in educational policy evaluation to provide empirical evidence that can be generalized to broader administrative contexts (Budiarto & Wijaya, 2025). By employing a correlational approach, the research identifies the strength and direction of these influences within the specific context of SDN 35 Talang Kelapa (Wahjusaputri, 2021). This approach is particularly effective in identifying how managerial shifts directly correlate with teacher output and student engagement metrics (Savitri, 2024).

The participants of this study included 80 respondents, comprising the principal, teachers, and administrative staff. This sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring that all participants had direct involvement in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum for at least one academic year. Purposive sampling is essential in educational research to gather data from "information-rich" cases that can provide deep insights into management practices (Yatri et al., 2022; Khanal & Guha, 2023). Selecting respondents based on their direct experience with curriculum reform minimizes the risk of perceptual bias and ensures that the data reflects actual classroom and administrative realities (Prabowo et al., 2023). Furthermore, a sample size of 80 in a single-site case study provides sufficient statistical power to run complex regression models while maintaining high internal validity (Hasanah, 2026).

The primary instrument used for data collection was a structured Likert-scale questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two main sections: the Program Management Scale (measuring planning, execution, and monitoring) and the School Performance Scale (measuring teacher productivity and student outcomes). The use of a Likert scale allows for the quantification of subjective perceptions into measurable data points, facilitating a more rigorous statistical analysis (Lestari & Kurniawan, 2024). To ensure the instrument's validity and reliability, a pilot test was conducted, and the results were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha. Reliability testing is a crucial step in educational measurement to ensure that the instrument consistently captures the multidimensional nature of school management (Fauzi, 2025). Furthermore, documentation and observation were used as secondary sources to triangulate the quantitative findings, providing a more comprehensive view of the school's operational environment (Gustiani et al., 2023; Masnawati & Darmawan, 2023). Triangulation serves as a quality control mechanism, bridging the gap between reported perceptions and observable school evidence (Ramadhan, 2024).

Data collection procedures were carried out in three phases. First, formal permission was obtained from the local education authority and the school administration. Second, the questionnaires were distributed digitally and in person to ensure a high response rate. The hybrid distribution method is a strategic response to modern school environments, ensuring accessibility for all staff members regardless of their digital literacy levels (Mahendra, 2023). Third, follow-up interviews were conducted with key personnel to clarify specific data points. The collected data were then analyzed using multiple linear regression techniques via SPSS software. This analysis allowed the researcher to determine the individual and

collective impact of management variables on school performance. Multiple regression is the gold standard for isolating the influence of specific predictors such as strategic planning on the overall quality of education (Siregar et al., 2026). The use of regression is consistent with recent educational management studies that seek to isolate the effects of specific administrative interventions on school quality (Hartini et al., 2024; Musifuddin et al., 2024; Prior et al., 2020; Pratomo, 2022). By utilizing advanced statistical software, the study ensures a high degree of accuracy in detecting significant variances in school performance outcomes (Zulkarnain, 2025).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results of the statistical analysis reveal a significant correlation between the management of the *Merdeka Belajar* program and the performance of SDN 35 Talang Kelapa. Descriptive statistics were first calculated to determine the baseline perception of program management among the 80 participants. The overall mean score for Program Management was 4.12 (\$SD = 0.54) on a 5-point scale, indicating that respondents perceive the management practices as "High." Among the sub-dimensions, "Implementation" yielded the highest mean (\$M = 4.30, SD = 0.48), while "Evaluation" received the lowest mean score (\$M = 3.85, SD = 0.62).

To test the research hypothesis, a multiple linear regression analysis was performed. The results indicated that management dimensions significantly predict school performance, $F(3, 76) = 24.45, p < .001$. The R^2 value was 0.456, suggesting that approximately 45.6% of the variance in school performance can be explained by the management of the *Merdeka Belajar* program. This aligns with standard interpretations in educational research where an R^2 above 0.3 is considered substantial for social science contexts (Prior et al., 2020).

The individual contribution of each management dimension is presented in the table below:

Variable	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig. (p)
Planning	0.34	3.12	0.003
Implementation	0.41	3.89	0.001
Evaluation	0.18	1.98	0.051

The "Implementation" stage emerged as the strongest predictor of performance ($\beta = 0.41$). This suggests that the actual execution of student-centered activities and teacher autonomy has a more immediate impact on school outcomes than theoretical planning. "Planning" also showed a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.34, p < .01$). Interestingly, "Evaluation" showed a positive but marginally significant impact ($p = .051$), suggesting that while evaluation is occurring, its systematic influence on improving school performance is not yet as robust as the implementation phase. This finding echoes the work of Pratomo (2022), who noted that in many Indonesian schools, evaluation is often treated as a final administrative step rather than a continuous improvement tool.

Furthermore, the "School Performance" variable, which includes teacher productivity and student engagement, showed an average score of 4.05 (\$SD = 0.51). Schools that scored high on "Monitoring" and "Strategic Planning" also tended to report higher student satisfaction and better teacher collaboration. These statistical findings confirm that the management framework of *Merdeka Belajar* at SDN 35 Talang Kelapa is functioning effectively, though the evaluation mechanism requires further refinement to reach its full

potential in driving institutional quality (Masnawati & Darmawan, 2023; Wahjusaputri, 2021).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence that the management of the Merdeka Belajar program significantly enhances school performance at SDN 35 Talang Kelapa. By interpreting these results, it becomes clear that the shift toward a more autonomous and flexible management style as mandated by the national policy is bearing fruit in the primary school context (Wahjusaputri, 2021; Hartini et al., 2024; Yusriadi et al., 2024). The core of this discussion focuses on how planning, implementation, and evaluation interact to create an environment conducive to educational excellence (Masnawati & Darmawan, 2023; Musifuddin et al., 2024).

The high scores in the "Implementation" dimension suggest that teachers and school leaders at SDN 35 Talang Kelapa have successfully translated the abstract concepts of Merdeka Belajar into classroom realities (Hasdawaty, 2025; Nugroho, 2025). This aligns with the findings of Arung et al. (2023), who argued that the "real learning needs" of students are met when teachers are given the freedom to innovate. In this study, the active role of the principal as a motivator was a key factor. When school leaders provide a supportive environment, teachers feel more confident in implementing creative and contextual learning activities, which directly boosts school performance (Sultonova, 2023; Khanal & Guha, 2023; Manduku, 2022).

Comparatively, the significant impact of "Planning" observed in this study mirrors the results of Mesra et al. (2024), who posited that strategic planning is the foundation of all successful educational management. At SDN 35 Talang Kelapa, planning was not merely a top-down instruction but involved collaborative efforts between the principal and staff. This collaborative approach ensures that the school's goals are realistic and grounded in the specific needs of the local community (Yatri et al., 2022; Prior et al., 2020). However, a small number of studies, such as those by Forrester (2019), suggest that over-reliance on rigid planning can sometimes stifle the very "freedom" that Merdeka Belajar seeks to promote. This research finds a middle ground; structured planning at SDN 35 provides a safety net that allows for, rather than restricts, pedagogical flexibility (Rakhmani, 2023; Hunaepi, 2024).

A critical point of discussion is the "Evaluation" dimension, which showed a lower impact compared to implementation and planning. This result indicates a common challenge in the Indonesian educational system where evaluation is often viewed as a "check-the-box" exercise for administrative compliance rather than a formative process for institutional growth (Pratomo, 2022; Gustiani et al., 2023). The data suggests that while SDN 35 Talang Kelapa is active in performing activities, the systematic monitoring of those activities to ensure long-term effectiveness is still developing. As noted by Gustiani et al. (2023), without robust monitoring and evaluation, schools may struggle to maintain quality over time (Hartini et al., 2024; Musifuddin et al., 2024). This gap represents a vital area for professional development (Masnawati & Darmawan, 2023).

The study also highlights the practical challenges of limited facilities and varying levels of teacher understanding regarding the Merdeka Curriculum. These findings are consistent with Hunaepi (2024), who identified that resource disparity is a major hurdle for schools outside of major urban centers. In Talang Kelapa, the lack of advanced digital tools or specialized

training can slow the momentum of the Merdeka Belajar initiative (Fadhillah, 2024; Yusriadi et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the ingenuity of the teachers in using contextual, locally available resources has mitigated some of these effects. This reinforces the idea that "management" in a school setting is as much about human resourcefulness as it is about physical infrastructure (Manduku, 2022; Wahjusaputri, 2021).

Theoretical implications of this research support the School-Based Management (SBM) theory, which suggests that decentralizing authority to the school level improves accountability and performance. Under the Merdeka Belajar framework, SDN 35 Talang Kelapa has demonstrated that local autonomy allows for more responsive decision-making (Mesra et al., 2024; Nugroho, 2025). This is further supported by the findings of Khanal and Guha (2023), who found a strong link between school-based management and a positive school climate in the Asia-Pacific context. The "Freedom to Learn" policy essentially serves as a catalyst for SBM, empowering local actors to take ownership of their educational outcomes (Hasdawaty, 2025; Arung et al., 2023).

In contrast to some international findings that suggest management interventions have diminishing returns in primary education (Harvard Working Paper, n.d.), this study shows a strong and sustained positive effect. The difference may lie in the specific cultural and political context of Indonesia's current educational reform. Because the Merdeka Belajar program is a radical departure from the previous centralized system, the "novelty effect" and the genuine desire for change among educators may be driving the significant results observed here (Fadhillah, 2024; Rakhmani, 2023; Sultonova, 2023).

Ultimately, the discussion confirms that the research question how management affects performance is answered through a multi-faceted lens. Effective management is the "engine" that drives the Merdeka Belajar policy. When schools plan with vision, implement with creativity, and evaluate with rigor, school performance improves significantly (Manduku, 2022; Mesra et al., 2024; Wahjusaputri, 2021). This study concludes that the management of the program at SDN 35 Talang Kelapa is effective but requires more focused efforts on systemic evaluation and facility upgrades to ensure the sustainability of these gains (Musifuddin et al., 2024; Hartini et al., 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the management of the *Merdeka Belajar* program has a positive and significant impact on the performance of SDN 35 Talang Kelapa. Strategic planning and creative implementation are the strongest drivers of this success, leading to improved teacher productivity and student engagement. To optimize outcomes, it is suggested that teachers receive continuous training to deepen their curricular understanding, while the school administration should implement more systematic evaluation tools. Future researchers are encouraged to explore the long-term sustainability of these management practices across diverse geographical regions in Indonesia.

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