



## The Role of School Principals in Improving Teacher Performance Through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform

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**Abstract.** This study aims to explore the role of school principals in enhancing teacher performance through the utilization of the Platform Merdeka Mengajar, a digital tool introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The research was conducted at SMP N 4 Jombang, employing a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of how principals support teachers in using this platform effectively. Data were collected through interviews with principals and teachers, as well as classroom observations. The findings indicate that the principal's leadership, underpinned by managerial competencies such as planning, organizing, supervising, and human resource development, plays a critical role in facilitating the integration of technology into teaching practices. Principals provided technical support, organized training sessions, motivated teachers, and created a collaborative environment to enhance the use of the platform. Additionally, the study found that the Platform Merdeka Mengajar positively impacted teacher creativity and the quality of learning interactions. However, the study also highlights challenges, such as limited technological infrastructure and the varying levels of digital literacy among teachers. The results underscore the importance of strong leadership in educational technology implementation and offer insights into effective strategies for enhancing teacher performance through digital platforms. The study also identifies limitations related to its sample size and scope and suggests avenues for future research on long-term impacts and the role of external factors in educational technology adoption.

**Keywords** School Leadership, Teacher Performance, Merdeka Mengajar Platform, Managerial Competence

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of education in Indonesia is the key to shaping a generation that is competent, innovative, and ready to compete in the era of globalization. As a country with a large population, Indonesia faces the challenge of ensuring that all students have access to quality, equitable, and relevant education aligned with current developments (Alifah, 2021). Quality education not only enhances students' academic abilities but also shapes character, life skills, and workforce competitiveness. This aligns with the goals of national development: to create superior human resources capable of driving economic, social, and technological progress.

Teachers in Indonesia face numerous challenges in meeting modern demands, particularly related to digitalization and the continually evolving curriculum. In the technological era, teachers are required to master various digital tools and online learning platforms, which may not align with their initial skill sets, especially for those unfamiliar with technology (Kamal, 2019). Additionally, curriculum changes such as the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Freedom Curriculum) demand that teachers be more creative, flexible, and adaptive in designing project- and competency-based learning. The lack of adequate

training, limited access to technology, and unequal infrastructure across regions pose major barriers. These challenges not only affect classroom learning processes but also risk reducing teachers' motivation and confidence in performing their professional duties.

The Merdeka Belajar (*Freedom to Learn*) program, initiated by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, is an educational transformation initiative aimed at creating a more flexible, relevant, and student-centered learning system. This program encourages innovation in education by granting greater autonomy to teachers, students, and schools to choose learning methods suited to local contexts and individual potential (Lidiawati, 2023). A key focus of *Merdeka Belajar* is reducing teachers' administrative burdens, granting schools greater autonomy, and introducing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes project-based learning, competency development, and character strengthening (Syafaruddin, 2017).

However, barriers to technology utilization, such as limited internet access and digital devices, remain significant challenges in many parts of Indonesia. Many schools, particularly in remote areas, face inadequate infrastructure, making it difficult for teachers to utilize technology effectively. Furthermore, teachers' competence in using digital platforms is often insufficient due to a lack of training and technical support. Teachers unfamiliar with technology tend to struggle with integrating digital tools into teaching, ultimately hindering educational innovation (Kurniawan, 2022).

These challenges significantly impact teachers' performance, especially in creating more creative and effective learning processes. Teachers who struggle with technology often rely on conventional teaching methods, causing students to miss opportunities for more engaging and interactive learning. The lack of guidance also reduces teachers' motivation to experiment with new teaching approaches, ultimately affecting the overall quality of education. To address these issues, greater efforts are needed to provide ongoing training, improve technology access, and offer consistent support for teachers.

As school leaders, principals play a strategic role in creating a supportive environment for teachers' performance. Principals are not merely administrators but also motivators and facilitators who guide teachers to achieve their best potential. Through effective supervision, training, and motivation, principals can help teachers overcome various challenges in the learning process (Sherly, 2020). Furthermore, principals are responsible for fostering good communication with teachers, establishing a collaborative

work culture, and recognizing teachers' achievements to boost their morale and productivity.

The role of principals is particularly crucial in ensuring that the *Merdeka Mengajar Platform* is utilized optimally by teachers. Principals must encourage teachers to understand the platform's benefits, provide the necessary training, and allocate time and resources to support its use. By leading the transition toward technology adoption, principals can inspire teachers to innovate in their teaching practices (Syafi'i, 2021). Additionally, principals are responsible for monitoring and evaluating the extent to which the platform improves teacher performance, providing appropriate feedback and support. Without effective leadership from principals, the potential of the *Merdeka Mengajar Platform* as an educational transformation tool will not be fully realized.

The success of the *Merdeka Mengajar Platform* implementation heavily depends on school leadership and teachers' performance as the front line of the learning process (Marisana, 2023). Principals who can provide direction, support, and motivation to teachers will create a conducive environment for maximizing the platform's utilization. On the other hand, teachers with strong competence and work spirit will more easily integrate the technology into their teaching, enhancing the creativity and effectiveness of learning processes. The synergy between school leadership and teacher performance is a key factor in leveraging the *Merdeka Mengajar Platform* to improve education quality.

This research is significant in providing strategic recommendations for principals to optimize their roles in supporting the *Merdeka Mengajar Platform*. By identifying the challenges faced and proposing practical solutions, this study is expected to guide principals in developing relevant policies and programs. Additionally, the findings can offer insights to other educational stakeholders in supporting technology-based educational transformation aligned with the vision of *Merdeka Belajar*.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Merdeka Belajar Curriculum***

The *Merdeka Belajar Curriculum* is an educational innovation designed to provide teachers and students with greater flexibility and freedom in the learning process. This curriculum emphasizes project-based learning, competency development, and character building, aiming to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century (Wahyudin 2024). Under this curriculum, students are encouraged to learn based on their interests,

talents, and potential, fostering a more active and engaged learning experience. This approach differs from previous structured curriculums, which often limited creativity. The primary goal of *Merdeka Belajar* is to cultivate independent, adaptive, and critical thinkers capable of navigating a rapidly changing world (Khoirulrijal, 2022).

A key feature of the curriculum is its learner-centered approach, where teachers act as facilitators. Project-based learning is a cornerstone of the curriculum, bridging theory and practical application. Additionally, schools have the flexibility to tailor the curriculum to local needs. The curriculum emphasizes core competencies such as literacy, numeracy, and character education, which are integrated across all subjects. This approach aims to equip students not only with knowledge but also the ability to apply it in real-life situations.

Teachers play a critical role in the successful implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. They are expected to shift from conventional teaching methods to more creative and innovative approaches. Teachers have the autonomy to design and implement teaching methods that best suit their students' needs, but this freedom also requires continuous improvement in pedagogical and technological competencies. To support this role, the government provides training programs and digital platforms such as *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*, designed to help teachers plan, execute, and evaluate lessons effectively.

Despite its advantages, the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* faces several challenges. One significant issue is the readiness of teachers and schools to adopt this new approach. Many teachers lack a comprehensive understanding of the principles and methods of this curriculum. Additionally, limited infrastructure, especially in remote areas, hinders technology-based learning. Another challenge is the mindset shift required among education stakeholders, including parents, who are often accustomed to the old curriculum system. Continuous support and socialization are needed to address these obstacles.

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum has the potential to significantly enhance the quality of education in Indonesia. By adopting a more adaptive and relevant approach, this curriculum aims to produce a generation with strong global competitiveness. The success of its implementation depends on the support of all stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, parents, and the government. If the challenges are effectively addressed, the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum can serve as a solid foundation for an

inclusive, innovative, and future-ready education system. Through this curriculum, Indonesia has a great opportunity to nurture a generation that excels not only academically but also in character and life skills.

### ***Managerial Competence of School Principals***

Managerial competence of school principals refers to the skills and abilities required to manage, lead, and develop schools effectively and efficiently. As educational leaders, school principals must possess competencies in planning, implementing, supervising, and evaluating various programs and activities (Yusutria 2022). Managerial competence is crucial, as school principals serve as a bridge between educational policies and their implementation on the ground. Without strong managerial skills, it is challenging to create a conducive learning environment and achieve the established educational goals.

One of the key aspects of managerial competence is planning and organizing. School principals must be capable of designing educational programs aligned with the school's vision and mission, as well as the needs of students and the surrounding community. Effective planning ensures that activities are well-directed and clear (Ismuha, 2016). Proper organization is equally important to optimize available resources, including teaching staff, facilities, and budgets. School principals should effectively delegate tasks and responsibilities to teachers and staff to ensure smooth operations.

Effective leadership is the cornerstone of a school principal's managerial competence. Principals must lead by example, inspire, and motivate teachers and staff to work with enthusiasm (Hutahean 2021). Leadership involves not only decision-making but also fostering good communication, involving all stakeholders in decision-making, and creating a positive work culture. The ability to motivate teachers to innovate and grow is essential in addressing the increasingly complex challenges of education, particularly in the digital era and amidst curriculum changes (Sutikno, 2018).

Managerial competence also includes the ability to monitor and evaluate teacher performance and the learning process in schools. Effective supervision ensures that programs are implemented in line with desired standards. Periodic evaluations provide insights into achievements in both academic and non-academic areas. Through evaluations, principals can identify weaknesses and implement improvements to enhance educational quality. Evaluations also serve as a foundation for making better strategic decisions in the future.

Principals with strong managerial competence must also excel in resource management. This includes managing school budgets, utilizing available facilities, and empowering teachers and staff to develop their potential (Hasnawati, 2021). Moreover, principals are required to innovate in addressing changes, such as integrating technology into learning, improving curriculum quality, or developing extracurricular activities that foster student character building. The ability of school principals to manage resources and innovate determines the quality of education and enhances the school's competitiveness.

## **2. METHODS**

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the role of school principals in improving teacher performance through the utilization of the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*. The research focuses on real-world phenomena, specifically in the educational context of schools that have implemented this platform (Sugiyono, 2018). Through the qualitative approach, the researcher can delve into the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by school principals and teachers in using the platform.

The case study design was selected to gather detailed information on how school principals optimize the use of the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar* within their school environment. This study will be conducted in several schools that have adopted the *Merdeka Belajar* program, focusing on the interactions and policies implemented by school principals to support teachers in using the platform. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the principal's role in specific contexts and an examination of how their policies and actions influence teacher performance.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data collection involves in-depth interviews with school principals and several teachers engaged in using the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*. The interviews aim to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding the platform's implementation, as well as the support, motivation, and guidance provided by the principals. In addition to interviews, the researcher will conduct classroom observations to assess how teachers integrate technology into their teaching processes and how school principals monitor and evaluate the platform's application.

### **Data Analysis**

The data gathered from interviews and observations will be analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The researcher will identify key themes emerging from the data, such as challenges in using the platform, the role of the school principal in providing support, and the impact on teacher performance. This analysis aims to uncover relevant patterns and relationships in the context of enhancing teacher performance through educational technology utilization.

### **Expected Outcomes**

The findings of this study are expected to provide deeper insights into how school principals can play a critical role in optimizing the use of the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar* to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the research aims to offer recommendations for school principals and other educational stakeholders on overcoming challenges and creating a more supportive environment for teachers to enhance their performance.

## **3. RESULTS**

This study aims to explore the role of school principals in enhancing teacher performance through the use of the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*, focusing on the managerial competencies of the principal at SMP N 4 Jombang. Based on the interviews and observations conducted, it was found that the principal at SMP N 4 Jombang demonstrates strong managerial competencies, which are reflected in key areas such as planning, organizing, supervision, and human resource development.

### **Principal Leadership Based on Managerial Competencies**

The leadership of the principal at SMP N 4 Jombang is strongly rooted in managerial competencies. Findings from interviews with the principal and several teachers revealed that the principal possesses adequate skills in planning, organizing, leading, and supervising the teaching process and teacher development.

#### **Planning and Organizing**

The principal regularly plans activities to improve the quality of education, including integrating technology into teaching. By leveraging strong managerial competencies, the principal organizes training sessions for teachers to familiarize them with technology and the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*. Teachers are given opportunities to practice and experiment with the platform in their teaching activities.

#### **Leadership and Influence**

In terms of leadership, the principal demonstrates the ability to inspire and motivate teachers. By actively listening to teachers' feedback on challenges they face when using the platform and adopting an inclusive approach, the principal creates a supportive work culture. This motivates teachers to proactively enhance their competencies.

### **Supervision and Evaluation**

The principal also excels in managerial supervision. They actively monitor the use of the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar* in classrooms. Teachers receive feedback on their use of the platform and are encouraged to consult the principal when facing difficulties. Evaluations focus not only on outcomes but also on the process, including the effective use of technology in teaching.

### **The Principal's Role in Enhancing Teacher Performance Through the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar***

In the context of improving teacher performance, the principal at SMP N 4 Jombang plays a critical role by utilizing the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*. This platform is an initiative from the Ministry of Education and Culture aimed at improving the quality of education in schools. The principal acts as the primary facilitator and supporter for teachers in using this platform effectively.

### **Support for Technology Implementation**

The principal provides comprehensive support for the implementation of the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*. This support includes technical facilities such as adequate internet access and supportive hardware, as well as enhancing teachers' digital skills. Regular training sessions and group discussions are held, allowing teachers to share experiences and tips for using the platform effectively.

### **Teacher Motivation and Guidance**

The principal acts as a motivator, encouraging teachers to continuously improve. By providing constructive feedback and appreciating teachers' efforts in leveraging technology, the principal fosters a professional environment. Direct mentoring is offered to teachers to address technical and pedagogical challenges in using the platform.

### **Evaluating the Platform's Impact on Teacher Performance**

Through evaluations conducted by the principal, it was observed that the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar* positively impacts teacher performance. Teachers at SMP N 4 Jombang showed improvements in creativity and their ability to design technology-based



lessons. The principal encourages teachers to evaluate their teaching outcomes using the platform, ensuring continuous improvement in teaching quality.

### **Collaboration and Professional Development**

The principal actively encourages collaboration among teachers in using the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*. Through teamwork and experience sharing, teachers at SMP N 4 Jombang effectively address challenges in technology-based teaching. The principal also supports professional development by allowing teachers time to participate in relevant online training and workshops.

### **Enhancing Learning Quality**

Through the principal's active role, teachers at SMP N 4 Jombang have become more skilled in integrating technology into their teaching processes. The *Platform Merdeka Mengajar* helps teachers design more varied and engaging lessons, tailored to the needs and characteristics of students. This has positively impacted teacher-student interactions, making them more interactive and enjoyable. Teacher performance has improved not only in the use of technology but also in delivering more relevant and engaging lesson content.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to explore the role of the school principal in enhancing teacher performance through the utilization of the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*, focusing on the managerial competencies of the principal at SMP N 4 Jombang. The findings reaffirm the importance of leadership in educational institutions, demonstrating how effective planning, organizing, supervision, and development of human resources can positively impact teacher performance. Specifically, the study highlights the principal's role in facilitating teacher training, fostering collaboration, and providing constructive feedback, which significantly enhances teachers' ability to integrate technology into their teaching.

The results indicate that the principal's managerial competencies align closely with the stated objectives, including effective planning and organization of technology-related initiatives, motivational leadership, rigorous supervision, and fostering professional collaboration among teachers. These findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that school leadership is pivotal in implementing educational innovations and improving teaching quality. Additionally, the results echo existing

literature that emphasizes the importance of structured support and digital training in adapting to technological advancements in education.

Unexpectedly, some teachers experienced challenges in fully utilizing the platform, despite training and support provided by the principal. This could be attributed to varying levels of digital literacy or resistance to change, which may require more personalized support and mentorship. Addressing these gaps could further maximize the platform's potential to improve teaching outcomes.

The managerial implications of this study are significant. Principals play a strategic role not only in shaping institutional policies but also in fostering a culture of continuous improvement and professional development. Policymakers and educational leaders should prioritize building the managerial competencies of school principals, as their leadership directly influences teacher performance and, ultimately, student outcomes.

However, the study is not without limitations. The focus on a single school may restrict the generalizability of findings to broader contexts. Furthermore, the study predominantly relied on qualitative data, which may introduce subjectivity in interpreting the results. Future research could address these limitations by employing a mixed-methods approach and expanding the sample to include multiple schools with diverse contexts.

Future studies could also explore the long-term impact of platform utilization on student achievement and assess the role of external factors, such as government policies and infrastructure, in supporting technology adoption in schools. Additionally, investigating how different leadership styles influence technology integration in education could provide valuable insights for advancing educational leadership practices.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the critical role of the school principal in enhancing teacher performance through the effective utilization of the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*. By leveraging strong managerial competencies, including planning, organizing, supervision, and professional development, the principal at SMP N 4 Jombang successfully facilitated the integration of technology into teaching practices. These efforts not only improved the digital skills of teachers but also contributed to more interactive and innovative learning experiences for students.

The findings highlight the importance of leadership in navigating the challenges of educational technology adoption. The principal's ability to provide training, motivation, and constructive feedback was instrumental in overcoming barriers and fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement among teachers. Moreover, the study emphasizes that well-structured support systems and inclusive leadership are essential for maximizing the benefits of technological platforms in education.

While the study underscores the significant contributions of the principal's leadership, it also identifies areas for improvement, such as addressing teachers' varying levels of digital literacy and resistance to change. Policymakers and educational stakeholders are encouraged to invest in leadership training programs that equip school principals with the skills needed to drive technological and pedagogical innovation in schools.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on educational leadership and technology integration by providing empirical evidence of the impact of managerial competencies on teacher performance. Future research is recommended to explore broader contexts, assess the long-term outcomes of platform implementation, and investigate how different leadership styles can further enhance the effectiveness of technology-driven teaching methods.

## **6. LIMITATION**

This study, while providing valuable insights into the role of school principals in enhancing teacher performance through the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*, has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the research was conducted at a single school, SMP N 4 Jombang, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The results are specific to this institution and its unique context, including its teachers' level of digital literacy, the principal's leadership style, and the school's infrastructure. Future studies could benefit from examining a broader range of schools to enhance the external validity of the findings.

Second, the study primarily relied on qualitative data from interviews and observations, which, while rich and detailed, may be subject to researcher bias and the limitations of subjective interpretation. A larger sample size and a mixed-methods

approach, incorporating quantitative data, could provide a more comprehensive view of the impact of *Platform Merdeka Mengajar* on teacher performance.

Third, the research focused on the immediate effects of platform implementation, with limited consideration of the long-term impact on teacher performance and student outcomes. A longitudinal study could provide deeper insights into how sustained use of the platform influences teaching practices and learning outcomes over time.

Finally, the study did not fully explore external factors such as socio-economic challenges or the broader educational policies that may affect the adoption and effectiveness of the platform. Future research could examine these external variables to gain a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing the successful integration of technology in schools.

Despite these limitations, the study provides important contributions to understanding the role of school leadership in leveraging educational technology to improve teaching and learning outcomes.

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