

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP EMPOWERMENT FOR IMPLEMENTING *MERDEKA BELAJAR* THROUGH PASSION-BASED LEARNING AT LABORATORY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This community service initiative sought to enhance school leadership and bolster teacher proficiency in executing the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) curriculum via Passion-Based Learning at the Laboratory Elementary School of Universitas Negeri Malang, Blitar. The activity utilized a participative methodology comprising many phases: socialization, training, classroom implementation, mentoring, and assessment. Twenty participants, comprising one principal and nineteen instructors, engaged in the program. Quantitative data were gathered using pre-test and post-test instruments and analyzed using descriptive statistics and the Wilcoxon test, whereas qualitative insights were derived from reflection sessions and observations. The results indicated a substantial enhancement in participants' comprehension and abilities, with the average score rising from 68.81 (good) to 90.36 (very good). Participants exhibited enhanced confidence, teamwork, and motivation in implementing Passion-Based Learning within the Merdeka Belajar framework. The program effectively improved instructional leadership, cultivated a passion-driven school culture, and established a sustainable framework for executing meaningful, student-centered learning.

Keywords:

Merdeka Belajar, school leadership, passion-based learning, empowerment, community service

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) curriculum, initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology to promote student-centered and contextually pertinent education, has profoundly altered the educational landscape in Indonesia. By removing strict bureaucratic frameworks, this approach hopes to free schools to concentrate on fostering students' character, creativity, and competency (Rohmad, 2020). Although the *Merdeka Belajar* framework allows for flexibility and autonomy, its effective implementation necessitates preparedness on many levels, particularly in the areas of teacher pedagogical competency and school leadership. The shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning is still difficult in many schools, including elementary schools, because of a lack of knowledge, creative teaching strategies, and insufficient leadership development (Anis & Anwar, 2020).

Empirical evidence indicates that school leadership is a crucial factor in effective educational reform. Research conducted by Juharyanto et al. (2021) indicates that both instructional and transformational leadership have a substantial impact on teacher performance and student academic success. Principals, serving as instructional leaders, oversee administration, influence pedagogical direction, promote teacher development, and foster innovation. To tackle pedagogical considerations, Passion-Based Learning (PBL) has surfaced as a pertinent methodology for actualizing the principles of *Merdeka Belajar* (Maisyaroh, Juharyanto, Wiyono, et al., 2023). This method emphasizes student enthusiasm, curiosity, and drive as the cornerstone of the educational experience. Mas'ud et al. (2019) emphasized that students exhibit increased engagement, motivation, and cognitive retention when they study subjects that fit with their personal interests. Hughes and Morrison (2021) assert that Passion-Based Learning promotes student agency, creativity, and ownership in the educational process. These traits align with the principles of *Merdeka Belajar*, which emphasize contextual and self-directed learning experiences that augment students' intrinsic motivation. Nonetheless, many educators are still oblivious to methods for integrating students' interests into structured learning frameworks that conform to curriculum standards.

Numerous prior investigations have underscored the significance of incorporating pedagogical innovation and empowering leadership as a sustainable school improvement strategy. De Jong et al. (2022) found that instructors' professional development and collective learning are facilitated by school-based collaboration. Maisyaroh, Juharyanto, Bafadal, et al. (2023) also underscored that teaching performance is more effectively improved by continuous mentoring and reflective practices than by one-time training sessions. A complete approach, in which leaders, educators, and facilitators collaborate in a cycle of learning, reflection, and implementation, is required for educational innovation, as this discovery lends credence to the notion that such an approach is necessary. Empowerment programs that integrate pedagogical development and leadership are required in order to improve the capacity of schools to follow the concepts of *Merdeka Belajar* through new teaching models such as Passion-Based Learning. Empowerment programs are required in order to achieve this goal.

Due to the fact that it acts as a model school and a training ground for those who are interested in becoming teachers (Maisyaroh, Wiyono, Chusniyah, et al., 2024), the Laboratory Elementary School of Universitas Negeri Malang, Blitar, is a vital partner in this effort of the university. There are still obstacles to overcome in order to bring the *Merdeka Belajar* vision into reality, despite the fact that it is a laboratory school. Teachers have reported that it is challenging to determine the interests of their students and to

construct learning activities that cater to those interests while also meeting the objectives of the curriculum (Maisyaroh, Wiyono, Untari, et al., 2024). Furthermore, the principal underscored the importance of bolstering instructional leadership to offer instructors the necessary support as they transition to a more student-centered approach. The innovations that were implemented as part of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy in numerous Indonesian schools have not been completely integrated into classroom practice. This matter is indicative of a more substantial challenge that numerous educational institutions are currently facing. This suggests that immediate professional development and mentoring programs are necessary to address this disparity by enhancing pedagogical and leadership competencies.

The purpose of this community service project was to strengthen the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* through Interest-Based Learning. It was developed as a cooperation between university facilitators, principals, and teachers. A participatory strategy was taken for the program, which ensured that the school community was actively involved in every stage of the process, beginning with the needs assessment and training design and continuing through the implementation, reflection, and evaluation stages (Romero et al., 2022). Administrators and teachers convened during the preliminary discussions to pinpoint areas for enhancement. The topics encompassed curricular integration, student evaluation, and classroom management approaches that promote interest-based learning. The inclusive process enabled the program to be culturally anchored and attuned to the genuine needs of the school community.

This curriculum is fundamentally based on the experiential learning framework (Kolb, 2014), which prioritizes learning via experience, reflection, and application. Educators are instructed to create learning modules that align students' particular interests with curriculum goals. Mentoring sessions implement the concepts of distributed leadership (Lumby, 2019), allowing teachers and principals to collaboratively share decision-making duties to enhance teaching quality. This community service program is characterized by the integration of leadership empowerment and interest-based instruction. This initiative, unlike conventional teacher preparation, prioritizes lasting transformation by enabling school leaders and educators to serve as catalysts for change within their educational environments. This community service initiative seeks to improve school leadership and augment teacher competence in implementing *Merdeka Belajar* through Interest-Based Learning. This activity specifically seeks to: (1) augment understanding of the *Merdeka Belajar* philosophy and its practical implementations; (2) cultivate teacher competencies in formulating and executing interest-driven learning; and (3) strengthen collaborative leadership practices that promote continuous pedagogical innovation. This program seeks to develop new educational competencies within the school community while promoting a sustainable, reflective, and innovative learning culture, in accordance with the ideals of *Merdeka Belajar*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowering School Leadership in the Era of Independent Learning

A position that is adaptable, collaborative, and forward-thinking is required of school leaders in order to accommodate the development of education in the 21st century. As a result of the Freedom to Learn policy, the role of principals has evolved from that of simple administrative managers to that of learning leaders who are responsible for actively cultivating a culture of autonomy and innovation within the educational environment. Nurabadi et al. (2022) established that instructional and transformational leadership styles substantially affect teacher performance and student progress by offering direction,

advice, and emotional support. (Maisyaroh et al., 2021) underscored that administrators are pivotal in actualizing Freedom to Learn by promoting school community engagement and fostering an environment conducive to creativity and adaptability in education. Empowering school leadership entails not just augmenting authority but also enhancing the principal's ability to impact classroom pedagogical methods. Yokuş (2022) asserted that principals who adopt reflective and participatory leadership can enhance learning quality through mentoring, feedback, and collaborative learning strategies. This concept aligns with Lumby (2019) theory of distributed leadership, which posits that leadership is not concentrated in a single individual but rather collaboratively shared among educators as professional partners to enhance the quality of learning.

An educational reform that prioritizes adaptability, self-directed learning, and competency-based learning is the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. This paradigm calls for a change in how educators and educational institutions think, with a greater emphasis on helping students reach their full potential and cultivate their creativity and character. Effective post-pandemic instructional leadership is essential for assisting instructors in adjusting to new teaching strategies that use digital technology and student-centered learning principles, according to Suanpang and Thangchitcharoenkhul (2021). Furthermore, according to Maisyaroh, Wiyono, Chusniyah, et al. (2024), putting *Merdeka Belajar* into practice calls for contextual learning designs that are customized to the unique needs of each learner. According to research by De Jong et al. (2022), professional collaboration in the classroom can enhance teacher competency and fortify a feeling of shared accountability when putting learning innovations into practice. *Merdeka Belajar*'s achievement requires teamwork based on reflective learning communities rather than individual accomplishments.

Passion-Based Learning as a Pedagogical Innovation

Putting students' interests, abilities, and intrinsic motivation at the heart of the learning process is the goal of the revolutionary learning technique known as Passion-Based Learning (PBL). Sverdlik et al. (2021) discovered that a favorable correlation exists between passion and emotional involvement, self-regulation, and academic well-being within the student body. According to Hughes and Morrison (2021), pupils are given the opportunity to research topics that are pertinent to their interests as part of a learning strategy known as passion-based learning (PBL), which helps pupils to develop their creative abilities and problem-solving skills. The *Merdeka Belajar* vision, which places a focus on the freedom and independence of students in determining the direction that their education will take while they are studying, is consistent with this approach, which is consistent with the ideology. In order to successfully adopt passion-based learning (PBL), it is necessary to shift the paradigm of education from being teacher-centered to being student-centered. To ensure that the learning experience continues to be relevant to the outcomes of the curriculum, teachers need to be able to map the interests of their students (a process that is known as "passion mapping"), incorporate the passions of their students into the design of their courses, and ensure that the learning experience continues to be relevant. It was stressed by Maisyaroh, Juharyanto, Wiyono, et al. (2024) that passion-based learning not only improves the creativity of teachers but also helps them build abilities in reflective thinking and adaptive instructional design. This is especially true when such learning is accompanied by ongoing mentoring. Kolb (2014) experiential learning model, which places an emphasis on learning through real-world experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application, is aligned with the learning cycle that is utilized in passion-based learning (PBL).

Integration of Leadership Empowerment and Passion-Based Learning

The novel approach to improving the execution of Independent Learning is the integration of Passion-Based Learning with empowering school leadership. An environment that fosters innovation and the implementation of student-interest-based approaches is fostered by empowered principals. Leadership serves dual roles: it encompasses supervision while also providing inspiration and facilitation for educators in fostering authentic learning (Abbas et al., 2020; Gerona & Bautista, 2022). Garver and Maloney (2019) assert that leadership practices focused on empowerment and equity enhance teachers' ability to respond adaptively to students' learning needs. The integration of these two aspects fosters a culture of learning within organizations, enabling principals, teachers, and students to engage in mutual learning and collaboration aimed at enhancing educational quality. The synergy between leadership and pedagogical innovation underpins this community service activity at the Laboratory Elementary School, Universitas Negeri Malang. The program distinguishes itself from traditional training by emphasizing the enhancement of teacher competency alongside the fortification of leadership and collaboration within the school context (Zacher et al., 2019). The findings of the literature review indicate that educational change is more efficacious when realized through synergistic empowerment that encompasses school leadership, instructional innovation, and cooperation with the educational community. This community service initiative is distinguished by its use of Passion-Based Learning as a pedagogical strategy, coupled with the empowerment of school leadership as a critical institutional element. This methodology improves teachers' professional skills and principals' leadership abilities while promoting a reflective, collaborative, and sustainable educational environment, consistent with the values of Freedom to Learn.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In order to improve the leadership skills of the principals and teachers at the Laboratory Elementary School, Universitas Negeri Malang, Blitar, in carrying out the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum through Passion-Based Learning, community service projects were carried out through a training and mentoring program. Socialization, training, implementation, mentorship, assessment, and sustainability were among the program's several interrelated phases. The socialization phase presented the program's goals and structure to the principal and 19 educators, highlighting the significance of Interest-Based Learning within the *Merdeka Belajar* ideology. This stage functioned as a platform to ascertain educators' requirements and obstacles in transitioning from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. Participants got theoretical and practical instruction on incorporating student interests into learning design during the training phase. Through workshops and group discussions, they acquired tools for mapping student interests and devising learning activities that promote creativity and autonomy. During the implementation phase, educators executed the developed learning model in their classrooms under the oversight of the principal and facilitators. The principal acted as an instructional leader, ensuring the consistent implementation of Passion-Based Learning principles throughout the educational framework. The mentoring and evaluation phase underscores ongoing support and the appraisal of program effectiveness. Participants' progress is assessed by pre- and post-test evaluations, supplemented with reflective discussions that highlight improvements in teacher confidence and collaboration. The program's sustainability phase emphasizes the project's continuity, ensuring that the ideas of Freedom to Learn and

Passion-Based Learning are embedded in the school's lasting vision, culture, and teaching methodologies. The analytical method employed to assess this activity is descriptive analysis to ascertain the mean value, succeeded by a Wilcoxon test utilizing SPSS 24.0.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The purpose of this community service project was to improve the leadership skills of teachers and principals in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum using the Passion-Based Learning approach at Laboratory Elementary School of Universitas Negeri Malang, Blitar. While Passion-Based Learning is a cutting-edge approach to achieving meaningful, contextual, and student-centered learning, the *Merdeka Belajar* concept highlights the significance of learning freedom focused on students' potential and interests. On Monday, June 23, 2025, this community service project was completed in a classroom at Elementary Laboratory School of Universitas Negeri Malang. A methodical approach was taken to finish this assignment, which was carried out in stages. The beginning of the first phase of the activity was marked by the beginning of program socialization for all of the principals and teachers. The goal of this program was to familiarize participants with the concepts of *Merdeka Belajar* and Passion-Based Learning, as well as introduce them to the ways in which these concepts might be applied to school leadership. The facilitator of this workshop presented a discussion about the challenges that administrators and teachers have when attempting to shift the paradigm of learning from one that is based on the teacher to one that is centered on the student. The comments and suggestions made by the participants served as the basis for the development of mentoring strategies and resources that were tailored to the actual requirements of the school.

The following phase involved mentorship and training on the real-world implementation of passion-based learning. The training materials encompassed: (1) Principles and philosophy of Independent Learning; (2) The concept of Passion-Based Learning in 21st-century education; (3) Leadership strategies for fostering a learning culture centered on student interests and potential; and (4) Learning design that incorporates passion mapping, student agency, and self-reflection. Figure 1 illustrates the presentation by the resource individual. Participants engaged in simulations and group discussions to design learning strategies that incorporate aspects of student enthusiasm. The facilitator offered basic instruments, such as student reflection sheets, that educators can utilize to discern and promote student interests in the classroom. Following the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, educators and administrators engaged in practical application of coaching and mentoring activities within the classroom setting. The facilitator guided participants in the use of the Passion-Based Learning approach inside daily educational activities. Educators were afforded the freedom to create a learning scenario centered on student interests while aligning it with the learning outcomes of the Independent Curriculum. The principle serves as an instructional leader who facilitates, motivates, and assesses the process.



Figure 1. Presentation of the Content by the Resource Person

To assess the degree to which the participants' ability to understand and apply Passion-Based Learning had improved, the activity was evaluated using a pre-test and a post-test. According to Table 1, the pre-test results showed an average score of 68.81, which is in the good category, and the post-test results showed an average score of 90.36, which is in the very good category. This significant improvement shows that the mentorship program was effective in improving the participants' knowledge and abilities. The exercise's effectiveness was assessed by comparing the scores before and after the activity using a Wilcoxon test. There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results, as indicated by the significance value of 0.00 obtained from the Wilcoxon test. It is feasible to conclude that this training was effective in improving the skills of both principals and teachers because the significance value is less than 0.05. Furthermore, the test's results showed a positive rank value of 20, meaning that each participant's post-test scores increased relative to their pre-test scores. Each and every participant benefited from the instruction, as evidenced by the fact that none of them reported a decline in their scores or any change at all. In addition to the assessment, an open reflection was conducted in which the school's principals and teachers shared their experiences, challenges, and suggestions for future work that could be carried out in a way that would be sustainable for the organization.

Table 1. Description of Participants' Capacity in Implementing Independent Learning Implementation Strategies Through Passion Trend Learning

Strategies Through Passion Trend Learning							
Component		Interval	Category	Frequency	Mean	Information	
Pre-Test	0	-	25	Not Good	0	68.81	Good
	26	-	50	Less Good	2		
	51	-	75	Good	17		
	76	-	100	Very Good	1		
Post-Test	0	-	25	Not Good	0	90.36	Very Good
	26	-	50	Less Good	0		
	51	-	75	Good	3		
	76	-	100	Very Good	17		
N : 20							

According to the outcomes of the activity reflection and evaluation, this mentoring initiative yielded numerous significant accomplishments: (a) Enhanced proficiency of principals and educators in comprehending and applying the principles of Independent Learning and Passion-Based Learning; (b) Development of a School Action Plan that prioritizes the identification of student interests as the foundation for educational planning; (c) Augmented collaboration between educators and principals, particularly in fostering a more adaptable learning culture focused on individual student potential; (d) Elevated teacher motivation and engagement, evidenced by participant enthusiasm (Figure 2) during the activity and reflective outcomes indicating a paradigm shift towards a more student-centered approach to learning.



Figure 2. Enthusiasm of Community Service Participants

Discussion

The mentoring activity for implementing "*Merdeka Belajar*" (Freedom to Learn) through Passion-Based Learning at the Laboratory Elementary School of Universitas Negeri Malang, Blitar, exemplified the significance of empowering school leadership in facilitating educational transformation at the elementary level. This approach emphasizes the enhancement of teachers' pedagogical skills and highlights the principal's role as an instructional leader who can inspire and guide the transition to a student-centered learning culture (Maisyaroh et al., 2021). The "*Merdeka Belajar*" initiative, introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, seeks to establish a learning framework that is more adaptable, student-centered, and pertinent to the requirements of learners. In this context, the principal serves a strategic role as the driving force behind the transformation. Principals gain empowerment through instructional leadership training, which guides them to serve as facilitators, motivators, and evaluators for teachers in the implementation of passion-based learning (Alemu & Abdillahi, 2020). The findings suggest that the principals successfully internalized the values of *Merdeka Belajar* and applied them in their daily leadership practices. Principals now serve not only as administrators but also as catalysts for change, promoting a learning environment that encourages the exploration of students' potential and interests. This modification corresponds with the perspective of Nurabadi et al. (2021), highlighting the significant influence of instructional leadership on teacher performance and student learning outcomes.

Improving teacher competence in developing and implementing passion-based learning is a

fundamental aspect of the activity. This strategy enables educators to create more significant and relevant learning experiences by initiating the educational process with the interests and abilities of their students. The evaluation results indicate a substantial enhancement in instructors' understanding and skills following their participation in training and mentoring, as demonstrated by an increase in the average pre-test score from 68.81 to 90.36 in the post-test. This enhancement aligns with the research findings of Sverdlik et al. (2021), which demonstrate that teachers may cultivate more creative and adaptive learning while positively influencing student motivation when they comprehend their passions. Maisyarah, Juharyanto, Wiyono, et al. (2024) assert that educators once accustomed to a teacher-centered pedagogical paradigm are increasingly embracing a student-centered approach, wherein students actively determine the trajectory of their education according to their individual interests and talents. This method illustrates the core principle of the freedom to learn, which is to allow students to study in alignment with the rules of nature and contemporary circumstances. Moreover, the implementation of Passion-Based Learning compels educators to engage in lifelong learning by necessitating continual adaptation to emerging pedagogical and technology innovations (Hughes & Morrison, 2021). Teachers' professional knowledge in identifying students' learning needs and their adeptness with instruments such as interest inventories and student reflection sheets is evidenced by the reflective process that ensues after classroom practice. This coaching enhances instructors' technical skills while fostering ongoing pedagogical awareness.

Educational reform necessitates robust collaboration between school leaders and educators (de Jong et al., 2022; Garver & Maloney, 2019). This mentoring initiative cultivates a collaborative environment within the school community, wherein the principal and teachers mutually assist in the design and execution of passion-driven learning. This teamwork is evident in the development of a School Action Plan that embodies a collective commitment to executing learning strategies aligned with student interests. This type of collaboration is consistent with the distributed leadership theory proposed by Lumby (2019). This theory asserts that the effectiveness of school leadership is improved when responsibility and decision-making are dispersed across a number of different stakeholders inside the institution. Educators at Elementary Laboratory School UM Blitar are actively engaged in the role of classroom innovators, while the principal serves as a strategic director, ensuring that the school is aligned with the Merdeka Belajar aim. The results of the reflection show that there is an increased synergy and a collective ownership of the school program, both of which are positive markers of the development of a culture of learning inside the business.

The mentoring activities' effectiveness was evidenced by statistical analysis employing the Wilcoxon Test, yielding a significance value of 0.00 ($p < 0.05$). This demonstrates a notable difference between pre- and post-training scores, with all participants ($N=20$) showing enhanced learning outcomes. The absence of score declines among participants supports the assertion that this mentoring model effectively enhances professional capacity. The employed training approach, which integrates socialization, conceptual training, hands-on practice, and reflection, exemplifies the implementation of experiential learning as outlined by Romero et al. (2022). Educators acquire knowledge through practical experiences, engage in reflective practices, and implement new insights within their professional environments. According to Maisyarah, Juharyanto, Adha, et al. (2024), this model exhibits a better capacity to produce major behavioral changes than standard training methods, which tend to prioritize merely the transfer of knowledge. Intrinsic motivation was fostered among the participants through this activity. The teachers presented a significant amount of enthusiasm for participating in the training, as indicated by the observations and reflections that

were conducted. In addition to demonstrating an improved capacity to perceive the individual potential of each student, the participants displayed an elevated level of self-assurance in their abilities to manage varied classroom configurations. This demonstrates that training that is both relevant and contextual can improve a teacher's sense of self-efficacy. According to Mizyed and Eccles (2023); and Nurabadi et al. (2022), self-confidence is an essential component that must be present in order to successfully implement changes in teaching practices.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The School Leadership Empowerment for Implementing *Merdeka Belajar* through Passion-Based Learning program has effectively enhanced the roles of administrators and teachers as catalysts for educational transformation. This curriculum has enhanced proficiency, promoted collaboration, and stimulated innovative, student-centered learning. This program, which has shown significant improvements in the learning outcomes of participants and a transformative shift in pedagogical practices, has the potential to serve as a model for leadership- and passion-driven school empowerment, in accordance with the ideals of *Merdeka Belajar*. There are strategic implications for the development of schools that are linked with *Merdeka Belajar* that may be derived from this community service program. Initially, from a leadership perspective, principals are required to continue working on improving their role as educational leaders by building a culture inside the institution that is thoughtful and collaborative. Second, from an educational point of view, teachers need to cultivate an environment that encourages creativity and improve learning techniques that are driven by teachers' passions in order to better fit curricular innovations and the characteristics of their students. Third, from an institutional point of view, schools are required to incorporate the results of this activity into their development plan in order to ensure the long-term viability of the program. The effective execution of Passion-Based Learning at Elementary Laboratory School UM Blitar City can exemplify a framework for other educational institutions to incorporate *Merdeka Belajar* principles into practical application. This paradigm demonstrates that systemic change can initiate from minor alterations at the educational unit level—via empowering training, significant collaboration, and inspirational leadership.

The implementation process was plagued by a multitude of issues, despite the activity's positive results. Several educators were unable to completely optimize their efforts in developing passion-driven learning initiatives due to the limited duration of classroom practice. Additionally, the implementation of Passion-Based Learning necessitates consistent mentorship to ensure its longevity. An additional issue is the necessity of providing resources and internal school policies that encourage curriculum flexibility, thereby allowing instructors to innovate more freely. The collaborative relationship between educators and the principal is indispensable social capital from the perspective of sustainability. Participants consented to create an internal Learning Community to function as a platform for reflection, the exchange of effective practices, and the development of sustainable learning innovations. This community service initiative enhanced individual capabilities and fostered a robust learning ecosystem.

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