



Principal-Led Curriculum and Learning Evaluation in Elementary Schools: An Integrative Review of the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract

Research on the Merdeka Curriculum has increasingly examined principal leadership and curriculum implementation; however, limited attention has been given to how principals integrate curriculum and learning evaluation into a continuous school improvement process. This study aimed to analyze principals' strategies in managing curriculum and learning evaluation and to formulate a conceptual framework for principal-led evaluation in elementary education. The study employed a qualitative approach using an integrative literature review of 35 sources related to instructional leadership, curriculum evaluation, academic supervision, assessment literacy, data-driven decision-making, and Merdeka Curriculum implementation. The synthesis identified five interconnected strategies: strengthening curriculum vision, building teacher reflection, using assessment data, conducting dialogical academic supervision, and ensuring follow-up actions. These strategies were integrated into a cyclical evaluation framework comprising diagnosis, planning, implementation, reflection, follow-up, and monitoring. The review indicates that curriculum and learning evaluation should function not merely as an administrative activity but as an evidence-based and reflective mechanism for continuous instructional improvement. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening principals' competencies in curriculum analysis, data literacy, academic supervision, teacher coaching, and reflective leadership to support adaptive and contextual curriculum implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian elementary schools has shifted curriculum governance from a centralized and content-oriented model toward a more flexible, contextual, learner-centered, and competency-based approach (Maruti et al., 2023; Maulida & Dermawan, 2024). This shift requires schools to translate national curriculum policies into operational curricula that respond to students' developmental needs, local contexts, teacher capacity, and available school resources, while strengthening formative assessment, differentiated instruction, and character development through the Pancasila Student Profile (Nugroho et al., 2025; Resa et al., 2023; Rifaldi et al., 2026). Within this context,

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curriculum evaluation can no longer be viewed merely as the administrative checking of teaching documents, lesson plans, or assessment reports. Rather, it needs to function as a continuous improvement mechanism that connects curriculum objectives, classroom practices, assessment evidence, teacher reflection, and student learning outcomes. Consequently, the role of school principals becomes increasingly strategic because effective curriculum implementation is closely associated with their capacity to lead, monitor, evaluate, and sustain instructional improvement (Pastore, 2023; Pastore & Andrade, 2019; Ralebese et al., 2025).

Principal leadership is widely recognized as an important factor in translating curriculum policy into meaningful instructional practice. Research on instructional leadership shows that principals contribute to school improvement by establishing academic direction, supporting teacher professional development, supervising instruction, facilitating collaboration, and using evidence to strengthen learning quality. In curriculum reform contexts, principals are therefore expected to function not only as administrative managers but also as instructional leaders who connect school vision, curriculum planning, teaching practices, assessment strategies, and professional learning. Research in Indonesia similarly indicates that principals play a significant role in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum through teacher coaching, resource management, academic supervision, collaborative decision-making, and continuous monitoring of curriculum practices (Aziz et al., 2025; Bastian et al., 2023; Diharja et al., 2023; Duan et al., 2023). These findings indicate that principal leadership is relevant not only to curriculum implementation but also to how schools organize evaluation and use evaluation results to improve instructional practice.

Curriculum evaluation within the Merdeka Curriculum can be understood as a systematic process for examining the coherence among curriculum planning, teaching implementation, assessment practices, student needs, and learning outcomes. Evaluation models such as Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) provide a useful framework for examining whether curriculum implementation is aligned with school conditions, available resources, instructional processes, and expected learning achievements. However, the value of evaluation depends on its capacity to generate actionable feedback for teacher development, curriculum revision, differentiated learning, and assessment improvement. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of systematic evaluation, instructional leadership, and evidence-based decision-making in educational improvement (Galdames-Calderon, 2023; Ghamrawi et al., 2024; He et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these perspectives need to be further connected to the specific leadership practices through which principals manage curriculum and learning evaluation at the school level.

This issue is particularly relevant in elementary schools, where teachers may encounter practical difficulties in translating curriculum flexibility into differentiated instruction, formative assessment, project-based learning, and contextual learning experiences. Studies on Merdeka Curriculum implementation have identified challenges related to uneven teacher understanding, limited facilities, gaps in professional development, insufficient assessment literacy, and differences in school readiness (Anidar et al., 2026; Engkizar, Jaafar, Hamzah, Syafril, Oktavia, et al., 2026). At the same time, principals can help address these challenges through teacher collaboration, academic supervision, professional development, and evidence-based curriculum decision-making (Hidayat et al., 2023; Hilda et al., 2025; Hsieh et al., 2024; Isa et al., 2022). These conditions suggest that curriculum evaluation requires leadership practices that move beyond monitoring compliance toward supporting teachers in interpreting evidence, reflecting on instructional practices, and implementing appropriate improvement actions.

The use of assessment data represents another important dimension of principal-led curriculum evaluation. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages schools to

use diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment results to understand student progress and determine appropriate learning interventions. Data-driven leadership research further indicates that principals need sufficient data literacy to interpret school reports, identify instructional priorities, support teachers in analyzing assessment evidence, and translate findings into improvement programs. Without adequate data literacy and reflective leadership, schools may collect substantial amounts of information without using it effectively to revise teaching strategies, improve learning, or respond to differences in students' learning needs (Ismail, 2025; Lestari et al., 2026; Marini, 2025; Marliyani et al., 2023). Accordingly, principal leadership in curriculum evaluation needs to encompass not only supervision and monitoring but also the development of a school culture that values evidence, reflection, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

Despite growing research on principal leadership and Merdeka Curriculum implementation, an important gap remains. Existing studies have largely examined principals' general roles as leaders, managers, motivators, or supervisors. Other studies have evaluated Merdeka Curriculum implementation using CIPP or similar evaluation models, but have tended to focus on curriculum implementation conditions and outcomes rather than on how principals manage evaluation as an instructional improvement process (Pietsch et al., 2025; Pont, 2020; Rumasukun et al., 2024; Engkizar et al., 2025). Meanwhile, research on instructional leadership and data-driven school improvement has demonstrated the importance of principals in supporting teacher performance and student achievement, but has not sufficiently explained how these leadership functions can be integrated with curriculum evaluation, learning evaluation, academic supervision, assessment data, and teacher reflection in the context of Indonesian elementary schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Mockler, 2018; Mulyadi et al., 2024; Nurbani et al., 2025; Papadakis et al., 2024).

The gap, therefore, is not simply the limited number of studies on principal leadership or curriculum evaluation, but the limited integration of these perspectives into a coherent principal-led evaluation framework. In particular, there remains a need to explain how principals connect curriculum vision, teacher reflection, assessment evidence, academic supervision, and follow-up actions within a continuous evaluation cycle. Addressing this gap is important because evaluation can contribute to instructional improvement only when its findings are interpreted, discussed, acted upon, and subsequently monitored. This study therefore aims to analyze principals' strategies in managing curriculum and learning evaluation during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools and to formulate a conceptual framework explaining how principals can transform evaluation from an administrative compliance activity into a data-informed, reflective, and improvement-oriented leadership practice.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using an integrative literature review design to synthesize scholarly evidence on principals' strategies in managing curriculum and learning evaluation during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. An integrative literature review was selected because it enables the synthesis of theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, policy documents, and methodological insights to develop a comprehensive conceptual understanding of a complex educational issue (Engkizar et al., 2026). Unlike reviews that focus primarily on narrowly defined intervention effects, an integrative review is appropriate for examining interconnected dimensions of educational management, including leadership, curriculum evaluation, instructional supervision, teacher

reflection, assessment practices, and school-based improvement (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

Literature Sources and Search Strategy

The review included 35 sources comprising 30 peer-reviewed journal articles, 3 curriculum policy documents, and 2 methodological references. The journal articles addressed topics related to instructional leadership, principal leadership, curriculum evaluation, Merdeka Curriculum implementation, teacher professional development, academic supervision, assessment literacy, and data-driven school improvement. The three policy documents were used to contextualize the analysis within the Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum framework, particularly curriculum regulation and learning and assessment guidelines, while the two methodological references supported the integrative review and curriculum evaluation framework.

The literature search was conducted through major academic databases and scholarly platforms, including Scopus, Web of Science-indexed journal portals, Google Scholar, ERIC, Crossref, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis, SpringerLink, MDPI, and accredited Indonesian journal portals. The search strategy combined English and Indonesian keywords to capture both international and Indonesian scholarship. The English keywords included “*principal leadership*,” “*instructional leadership*,” “*curriculum evaluation*,” “*learning evaluation*,” “*Merdeka Curriculum*,” “*elementary school leadership*,” “*academic supervision*,” “*teacher reflection*,” “*assessment literacy*,” “*data-driven school improvement*,” and “*curriculum implementation in elementary schools*.” Indonesian keywords included “*kepemimpinan kepala sekolah*,” “*evaluasi kurikulum*,” “*evaluasi pembelajaran*,” “*Kurikulum Merdeka*,” “*supervisi akademik*,” and “*sekolah dasar*.”

Reference tracing was also conducted from relevant publications to identify additional sources that were not captured through the initial keyword searches. The search focused on literature relevant to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and principal-led curriculum and learning evaluation in elementary or school-level contexts.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included when they met the following criteria: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles or authoritative policy and methodological documents; (2) conceptual or empirical relevance to principal leadership, curriculum evaluation, learning evaluation, academic supervision, assessment, or school improvement; (3) relevance to elementary education or school-level curriculum implementation; and (4) sufficient bibliographic information to support source identification and citation, including a DOI when available. Priority was given to studies published in internationally indexed journals, including Scopus and Web of Science-indexed journals, as well as Indonesian journals accredited by SINTA.

Sources were excluded when they consisted of non-academic opinion pieces, unpublished manuscripts, publications without clear authorship or publication identity, studies unrelated to school leadership or curriculum evaluation, or studies that discussed curriculum implementation without a meaningful connection to leadership, evaluation, supervision, teacher development, assessment practices, or school improvement.

Literature Selection and Data Extraction

The review process consisted of four stages. First, potentially relevant literature was identified through database searches, scholarly platforms, and reference tracing. Second, titles and abstracts were screened to assess their relevance to the research focus. Third, potentially eligible full texts were examined based on their conceptual contribution, methodological relevance, educational context, and findings concerning principal strategies in curriculum and learning evaluation. Fourth, the selected

sources were organized in a literature matrix to facilitate systematic comparison and synthesis (Baroud et al., 2025; Kassymova et al., 2025).

The literature matrix recorded author, publication year, research focus, methodological design, research context, key findings, relevance to the Merdeka Curriculum, and contribution to the conceptual framework. From the broader literature base, five core articles were identified as particularly relevant because they directly addressed principal leadership, curriculum evaluation, academic supervision, data-driven planning, and Merdeka Curriculum implementation at the elementary or school level. These five studies were used as the core empirical basis for developing the conceptual synthesis presented in the findings.

Data Analysis

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic synthesis. The analysis involved comparing studies to identify recurring patterns, conceptual relationships, differences in findings, and areas that remained insufficiently integrated in previous research. The initial analytical categories were derived from the research focus and refined during the synthesis process. These categories included instructional leadership, curriculum evaluation, learning assessment, teacher reflection, academic supervision, professional learning communities, data-based decision-making, and continuous school improvement (Alatise & Akinfolarin, 2025; Engkizar et al., 2023).

The synthesis then focused specifically on how principals formulate curriculum vision, facilitate teacher reflection, interpret assessment data, conduct academic supervision, and ensure follow-up actions after evaluation. Rather than merely summarizing individual studies, the analysis examined how findings from different strands of literature could be connected to explain principal-led curriculum and learning evaluation as an integrated school improvement process. This analytical process resulted in five interconnected principal strategies: strengthening curriculum vision, building teacher reflection, using assessment data, conducting dialogical academic supervision, and ensuring follow-up actions.

The final stage of the synthesis was the formulation of a conceptual model in which curriculum and learning evaluation operates as a cyclical process consisting of diagnosis, planning, implementation, reflection, follow-up, and monitoring. The model was developed by integrating recurring findings across the reviewed literature rather than by statistically aggregating study outcomes.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study relied exclusively on published literature and policy documents and did not involve human participants, direct participant-related ethical approval was not required. Ethical considerations instead focused on accurate citation, faithful representation of the reviewed sources, avoidance of source misrepresentation, and clear distinction between empirical findings reported in previous studies, policy-based information, and the conceptual interpretation developed by the authors.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The integrative literature review included 35 sources comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, curriculum policy documents, and methodological references related to principal leadership, instructional leadership, curriculum evaluation, learning evaluation, academic supervision, assessment literacy, data-driven decision-making, and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. The reviewed literature shows that research on the Merdeka Curriculum has increasingly addressed principal leadership, teacher readiness, curriculum adaptation, formative assessment, and school-based improvement. However, most studies have examined principals' roles in general curriculum implementation, while relatively fewer studies have specifically addressed how principals manage curriculum and learning evaluation

as an integrated improvement cycle. The profile of the reviewed literature is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Reviewed Literature

Source Category	Number of Sources	Main Focus
Peer-reviewed journal articles	30	Principal leadership, instructional leadership, curriculum implementation, assessment literacy, supervision, and school improvement
Policy documents	3	Merdeka Curriculum regulation, learning and assessment guidelines, and school-level curriculum implementation
Methodological references	2	Integrative literature review and curriculum evaluation framework
Total	35	Literature base for conceptual synthesis

Table 1 shows that peer-reviewed journal articles constituted the dominant source category in the review, providing the main empirical basis for the synthesis. Policy documents were used to contextualize the findings within the Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum framework, while methodological references supported the review design and synthesis process.

To identify the studies most directly related to the research focus, five core articles were screened based on their relevance to principal leadership, curriculum evaluation, academic supervision, data-driven planning, and Merdeka Curriculum implementation in elementary or school-level contexts. The screening results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Screening of Five Core Articles Included in the Review

Author(s) and Year	Focus of Study	Method or Design	Key Finding Relevant to This Study	Contribution to the Present Study
Isa et al. (2022)	Principal roles in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools	Qualitative study	Principals function as supervisors, evaluators, and facilitators in supporting curriculum implementation; challenges include teacher readiness and limited technological support	Supports the finding that principals must manage evaluation through supervision, teacher support, and problem-solving
Mulyadi et al. (2024)	Evaluation of Independent Curriculum implementation at the elementary school level using the CIPP model	Qualitative case study using CIPP evaluation	Curriculum implementation can be evaluated through context, input, process, and product dimensions	Provides a structured framework for understanding curriculum evaluation as a systematic and multidimensional process
Ralebese et al. (2025)	Instructional leadership practices of primary school principals in	Qualitative case study	Primary school principals influence curriculum reform through direction setting, teacher support, and	Strengthens the argument that principals must act as instructional leaders in curriculum evaluation and learning

	curriculum reform		monitoring of instructional practice	improvement
Nurbani et al. (2025)	Strategic principal leadership in data-driven and value-based school planning	Case study in Indonesian primary education	Principals use data-driven planning integrated with school values to improve school management and decision-making	Supports the finding that curriculum and learning evaluation should be based on data, reflection, and contextual school values
Marini (2025)	The influence of elementary school principal supervision on Merdeka Curriculum implementation in the digital era	Systematic literature review	Principal supervision significantly influences the success of Merdeka Curriculum implementation, with academic supervision as a dominant factor	Reinforces the importance of academic supervision as a key strategy in managing learning evaluation

The five core studies consistently position principals as strategic actors in curriculum implementation and instructional improvement. Isa et al. (2022) emphasize supervision, evaluation, and teacher support; Mulyadi et al. (2024) provide a multidimensional perspective through the CIPP model; Ralebese et al. (2025) highlight instructional leadership in curriculum reform; Nurbani et al. (2025) demonstrate the importance of data-driven and value-based planning; and Marini (2025) emphasize academic supervision in supporting Merdeka Curriculum implementation.

The synthesis of the reviewed literature identified five interconnected principal strategies in managing curriculum and learning evaluation: strengthening curriculum vision, building teacher reflection, using assessment data, conducting dialogical academic supervision, and ensuring follow-up actions. These strategies are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Principal Strategies in Managing Curriculum and Learning Evaluation

Strategy	Main Finding	Practical Form in Elementary Schools
Strengthening curriculum vision	Principals need to align national curriculum policy with school context, student needs, teacher capacity, and local characteristics	Developing the school operational curriculum based on student characteristics, local context, and available school resources
Building teacher reflection	Evaluation becomes meaningful when teachers reflect on teaching practices and student learning evidence	Conducting teacher reflection forums, learning communities, and curriculum evaluation meetings
Using assessment data	Assessment results should guide instructional decisions and curriculum improvement	Analyzing diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment data to design remedial, enrichment, and differentiated learning
Conducting dialogical academic supervision	Supervision should function as professional assistance rather than administrative inspection	Classroom observation, feedback discussion, teaching module review, and coaching sessions
Ensuring follow-up actions	Evaluation must lead to concrete improvement plans	Revising teaching strategies, improving assessment

instruments, mentoring teachers, and monitoring progress

Table 3 indicates that principal strategies extend beyond monitoring curriculum documents. The five strategies form a connected set of leadership practices linking curriculum direction, teacher reflection, assessment evidence, supervision, and improvement actions. Among these strategies, the use of assessment data and follow-up actions provides a direct connection between evaluation findings and changes in instructional practice.

The synthesis further indicates that curriculum and learning evaluation is most appropriately understood as a cyclical process rather than a one-time activity. The process begins with the identification of curriculum and learning needs, followed by planning, implementation, reflection, follow-up, and monitoring. The principal has a different but interconnected responsibility at each stage. The resulting evaluation cycle is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Principal-Led Evaluation Cycle in the Merdeka Curriculum

Evaluation Stage	Principal's Role	Expected Output
Diagnosis	Identifying student needs, teacher readiness, and school curriculum challenges	Map of curriculum and learning needs
Planning	Setting evaluation priorities and improvement targets	School-based curriculum evaluation plan
Implementation	Supporting teachers and monitoring learning practices	Evidence of curriculum and learning implementation
Reflection	Facilitating discussion on assessment results and teaching challenges	Shared understanding of learning problems
Follow-up	Designing improvement actions based on evaluation findings	Revised teaching strategies, mentoring plans, and assessment improvement
Monitoring	Reviewing the effectiveness of follow-up actions	Continuous improvement of curriculum and learning quality

Table 4 shows that each stage produces information that becomes the basis for the subsequent stage. Diagnosis informs planning, implementation generates evidence, reflection interprets the evidence, follow-up translates findings into improvement actions, and monitoring assesses the sustainability of those actions. The cycle therefore connects evaluation with teacher development and instructional improvement.

Based on the synthesis of the five strategies and the evaluation cycle, the review identified an integrated model of principal leadership. In this model, the principal assumes five interconnected roles: curriculum vision builder, data interpreter, teacher coach, supervision facilitator, and improvement manager. The model is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Integrated Model of Principal Strategy

Principal Role	Function in Curriculum and Learning Evaluation	Core Outcome
Curriculum vision builder	Aligns curriculum policy with school context	Contextual curriculum implementation
Data interpreter	Uses assessment evidence to identify learning needs	Evidence-based instructional decisions
Teacher coach	Supports teacher reflection and professional growth	Improved teacher capacity
Supervision facilitator	Conducts academic supervision through dialogue and feedback	Better classroom practices
Improvement	Ensures evaluation results are followed	Sustainable school

manager	up and monitored	improvement
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Table 5 summarizes the central conceptual result of the review. The principal's role in Merdeka Curriculum implementation extends beyond administrative management to include strategic and instructional functions. The integrated model connects curriculum policy, assessment evidence, teacher development, academic supervision, and follow-up actions within a single evaluation process. Thus, the principal becomes a key actor in translating evaluation findings into continuous improvements in curriculum implementation and classroom practice.

The findings indicate that managing curriculum and learning evaluation under the Merdeka Curriculum requires a shift from an administrative orientation toward a more integrated instructional leadership approach. The five identified strategies strengthening curriculum vision, building teacher reflection, using assessment data, conducting dialogical academic supervision, and ensuring follow-up actions suggest that evaluation becomes effective when it is embedded in the principal's broader responsibility for instructional improvement. This position is consistent with Isa et al. (2022), who found that principals play a central role in Merdeka Curriculum implementation through supervision, teacher guidance, and evaluation. The present review extends this perspective by showing that these functions are not separate activities but interconnected components of a continuous evaluation and improvement process.

The first important finding concerns the role of curriculum vision. Under the Merdeka Curriculum, principals are expected to translate national curriculum policy into school-level practices that correspond with student characteristics, teacher capacity, and available resources. This makes curriculum leadership more contextual than merely ensuring compliance with policy documents. The finding is consistent with Ralebese et al. (2025), who demonstrated that primary school principals influence curriculum reform through direction setting, teacher support, and monitoring of instructional practices. In the present synthesis, however, curriculum direction is directly connected to evaluation. Principals therefore need to establish clear evaluation priorities that reflect both curriculum objectives and actual learning conditions in schools.

The second finding concerns teacher reflection. The review shows that evaluation does not produce meaningful improvement when assessment results and classroom observations remain only as records. Teachers need opportunities to interpret evidence, discuss instructional challenges, and reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching practices. This strengthens the instructional dimension of principal leadership because the principal is not simply an evaluator of teachers but also a facilitator of professional learning. In this context, teacher reflection forums, professional learning communities, and curriculum evaluation meetings can serve as mechanisms through which evaluation findings are collectively interpreted and transformed into instructional decisions.

The third finding relates to the use of assessment data. Nurbani et al. (2025) emphasized that data-driven planning can strengthen school management and decision-making when data are interpreted in relation to school values and contextual conditions. The present review extends this argument into curriculum and learning evaluation. Assessment data should function as evidence for identifying learning gaps, adjusting teaching strategies, designing remedial and enrichment activities, and supporting differentiated learning. Consequently, the effectiveness of data-driven evaluation depends not simply on the availability of assessment data but on the capacity of principals and teachers to interpret and use those data appropriately.

This finding also connects principal leadership with assessment literacy. Pastore & Andrade (2019) and Pastore (2023) emphasized the importance of assessment literacy for improving the validity and usefulness of classroom

assessment. When teachers have limited capacity to design, interpret, or use assessment evidence, the potential of evaluation to improve learning is also constrained. Principals therefore have an important role in creating professional learning opportunities that strengthen teachers' assessment literacy. This can include collaborative analysis of student learning evidence, discussion of assessment quality, and support for the use of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment results in instructional planning.

The fourth finding concerns academic supervision. Marini (2025) reported that principal supervision significantly influences the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools, with academic supervision emerging as an important factor. The present review supports this finding but further specifies the form that effective supervision should take. Rather than functioning primarily as inspection or administrative document checking, academic supervision should operate as professional assistance. Classroom observation, feedback discussions, teaching module review, assessment instrument analysis, and coaching can provide principals with opportunities to understand instructional challenges and support teachers in addressing them. This dialogical orientation is particularly relevant to a curriculum framework that provides greater flexibility for teachers and schools.

The fifth finding, concerning follow-up actions, represents an important link between evaluation and school improvement. Evaluation has limited value when findings are not translated into concrete actions. The review shows that follow-up may involve revising teaching strategies, improving assessment instruments, mentoring teachers, and monitoring subsequent changes in practice. This finding reinforces the importance of viewing evaluation as a cycle rather than a final reporting stage. In this sense, the monitoring stage is essential because it determines whether the actions taken after evaluation actually contribute to improvement.

The integration of these findings also provides a more specific interpretation of the CIPP perspective discussed by Mulyadi et al. (2024). Their study demonstrates that Merdeka Curriculum implementation can be examined through context, input, process, and product dimensions. The present review connects these dimensions with concrete principal leadership practices. Context is reflected in the diagnosis of student and school needs; input is associated with teacher capacity and learning resources; process is represented through implementation monitoring and academic supervision; and product is reflected in the interpretation of learning evidence and subsequent improvement actions. The contribution of the present study is therefore not to replace the CIPP framework but to connect its evaluative dimensions with principal-led instructional leadership practices.

The findings are also consistent with broader evidence concerning instructional leadership and student learning. Pietsch et al. (2025) showed that instructional leadership is associated with student achievement across different educational and cultural contexts. The present synthesis provides a more specific explanation of how this leadership orientation can operate within curriculum evaluation. Principal leadership becomes instructionally meaningful when it connects curriculum goals, teacher development, assessment evidence, supervision, and follow-up actions. Thus, the contribution of the principal is not limited to setting direction but also includes creating the organizational conditions necessary for teachers to use evaluation evidence for improving learning.

Novelty and Theoretical Contribution

The main novelty of this study lies in the formulation of an integrated principal-led evaluation framework for the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. Previous studies have addressed principal roles in curriculum implementation, CIPP-based curriculum evaluation, instructional leadership, academic supervision, and data-driven school planning, but these dimensions have

generally been discussed separately. The present review integrates them into a single conceptual model comprising five principal roles: curriculum vision builder, data interpreter, teacher coach, supervision facilitator, and improvement manager.

The proposed framework also conceptualizes curriculum and learning evaluation as a continuous cycle consisting of diagnosis, planning, implementation, reflection, follow-up, and monitoring. This perspective shifts the position of evaluation from administrative compliance toward reflective, evidence-based, and improvement-oriented leadership. The model consequently provides a conceptual bridge between curriculum management and instructional leadership by demonstrating how evaluation can become an ongoing mechanism for school improvement.

The theoretical implication is that instructional leadership in the context of curriculum reform should be understood not only in terms of teacher motivation, instructional monitoring, or administrative coordination but also in terms of the principal's capacity to establish an evaluative culture. Such a culture connects curriculum objectives, teacher practices, assessment evidence, and student learning needs. The findings therefore enrich the instructional leadership perspective by placing curriculum and learning evaluation at the center of the principal's strategic role.

Practical and Policy Implications

The practical implication of the findings is that principals need competencies extending beyond curriculum administration. In particular, they need capacity in curriculum analysis, academic supervision, assessment data interpretation, teacher coaching, and reflective decision-making. Schools can support these functions by institutionalizing regular evaluation forums, professional learning communities, collaborative assessment analysis, and systematic follow-up mechanisms.

From a policy perspective, principal training for the Merdeka Curriculum should place greater emphasis on curriculum and learning evaluation. Training should address not only curriculum documents and administrative requirements but also the practical skills required to facilitate teacher reflection, interpret assessment data, conduct dialogical supervision, and monitor follow-up actions. Education authorities may further support this process by providing practical evaluation instruments, mentoring systems, and digital platforms that facilitate evidence-based curriculum management. Such support can strengthen the capacity of principals to implement the Merdeka Curriculum in ways that are more contextual, adaptive, and responsive to student learning needs.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on an integrative literature review and therefore does not provide direct empirical evidence from fieldwork in elementary schools. Second, although the reviewed literature provides conceptual and empirical support for the proposed framework, the model has not yet been tested across different school contexts, including urban and rural schools, public and private schools, or schools with different levels of teacher readiness and resource availability. Third, the review primarily focuses on the strategic role of principals and does not examine in depth the perspectives of teachers, students' learning experiences, or parents' involvement in curriculum evaluation.

Future research should therefore empirically test the proposed framework through case studies, mixed-method designs, classroom observations, interviews with principals and teachers, and analyses of school evaluation documents. Such studies would provide further evidence concerning how principals implement the proposed evaluation cycle and whether the identified strategies contribute to changes in teacher practices, assessment quality, curriculum implementation, and student learning outcomes under the Merdeka Curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that principals play a strategic role in managing curriculum and learning evaluation during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. The findings show that effective evaluation is not limited to administrative monitoring, but requires principals to strengthen the school curriculum vision, facilitate teacher reflection, use assessment data, conduct dialogical academic supervision, and ensure systematic follow-up actions. The main contribution of this study lies in the formulation of a principal-led evaluation framework that integrates diagnosis, planning, implementation, reflection, follow-up, and monitoring as a continuous cycle of school improvement. This framework positions the principal not only as an administrator, but also as a curriculum vision builder, data interpreter, teacher coach, supervision facilitator, and improvement manager.

The implications of this study suggest that principal training and school improvement programs should place stronger emphasis on curriculum evaluation, learning assessment, data literacy, academic supervision, and reflective leadership. Since this study is based on an integrative literature review, its limitation lies in the absence of direct empirical field data from elementary schools. Therefore, future research should test the proposed framework through case studies, mixed-method designs, classroom observations, interviews with principals and teachers, and analysis of school evaluation documents to examine how principal-led evaluation strategies influence teacher practices, curriculum implementation, and student learning outcomes.

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