Pioneering Inclusive Schools: The Role of School Principals in Realizing Freedom of Learning

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Abstract:

This research aims to analyze the role of madrasa heads in realizing independent learning in inclusive schools in madrasah. This study uses a case study-type qualitative research approach. Data collection techniques are carried out through interviews, observation and documentation. Data analysis is carried out circularly, from data reduction to data presentation and conclusion. The main findings of this research include changes in teaching and learning methods that are more inclusive, the use of digital resources to expand access to education, and the development of collaborative learning that supports learner-centred learning. The results of this research show that madrasah that adopt digital information technology can increase the accessibility of Islamic education for various levels of society by providing technological infrastructure, increasing human resource capacity, implementing digital learning and continuous evaluation. This research provides implications regarding the importance of inclusive approaches and digital information technology in realizing the "*Merdeka Belajar*/Freedom of Learning" vision in madrasah and the Islamic education sector more broadly.

Keywords: *Madrasah Transformation, Madrasah Head, Inclusive School, Freedom to Learn*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tentang peran kepala madrasah dalam mewujudkan merdeka belajar pada sekolah inklusif di madarah. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan penelitian kualitatif jenis studi kasus. Teknik pengumpulan datanya dilakukan melalui interview, observasi dan dokumentasi. Analisis datanya dilakukan secara sirkuler, yang dimulai dari reduksi data, penyajian data dan penarikan kesimpulan. Temuan utama penelitian ini mencakup perubahan dalam metode pengajaran dan pembelajaran yang lebih inklusif, pemanfaatan sumber digital untuk memperluas akses pendidikan, serta pengembangan pembelajaran kolaboratif yang mendukung pembelajaran yang berpusat pada peserta didik. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa madrasah yang mengadopsi teknologi informasi digital mampu meningkatkan aksesibilitas pendidikan Islam bagi berbagai lapisan masyarakat dengan melakukan beberapa tahapan penyediaan infrastuktur teknologi, peningkatan kapasitas SDM, penerapan pembelajaran digital dan evaluasi berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini memberikan implikasi tentang pentingnya pendekatan inklusif dan teknologi informasi digital dalam mewujudkan visi "Merdeka Belajar" di madrasah dan sektor pendidikan Islam secara lebih luas.

Kata Kunci: *Transformasi Madrasah, Kepala Madrasah, Sekolah Inklusif, Merdeka Belajar*

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the main pillars in the development of a nation (Siregar et al., 2023). In Indonesia, education has a vital role in forming a young generation who is competent, competitive, and able to contribute positively to the country's progress. The transformation of madrasah into inclusive schools based on digital information technology is a progressive step in responding to the challenges of 21st-century education (Indraswati et al., 2020; Sukmayadi, 2020; Rohman et al., 2023). This concept has great potential in realizing the vision of "freedom of learning *(Merdeka Belajar)*," which describes a new paradigm in learning that is student-centred and adapts to current developments.

Madrasah, as one of the educational institutions in Indonesia, have experienced significant development in recent years (Shaturaev et al., 2021). The transformation of madrasah into inclusive schools refers to efforts to expand access to education to all levels of society regardless of religious background, culture or physical condition (Sukino et al., 2020; Sabara, 2022). This aligns with the spirit of inclusion, where everyone has the same right to receive quality education. Digital information technology, with all its capabilities and flexibility, is an essential tool in realizing this inclusive school concept.

In this context, independent learning becomes the primary basis for providing more excellent space for students to participate actively in their learning process (Toh et al., 2020; Archambault et al., 2022),. Freedom to learn means allowing students to choose their path to achieving educational goals according to their interests, talents and needs. The madrasah head chose to transform the madrasa into an inclusive school based on digital information technology, offering a variety of learning methods that can be adapted to each student's individual preferences and needs (Mu'is & Suwandi, 2022).

The importance of independent learning has been reviewed by several previous studies, including Rahayu et al. (2022), who said that independent learning is designed to allow students to learn calmly, relaxed, fun, stress-free and pressure-free. Then Nuryanti (2021) said that with the independent learning application, students could show their natural talents because learning is student-centred; it is essential to shift the focus from a teacher-centred teaching approach to a student-centred approach. Furthermore, Angyanur et al. (2022) emphasized that independent learning gives students more control over their learning process by allowing them to determine their learning methods and interests, encouraging creativity and innovation to form and develop independent and responsible abilities.

Madrasah principals have a very strategic role in realizing Freedom of Learning by adopting the concept of inclusive schools. Madrasah heads need to formulate a vision and mission that supports the concept of inclusive schools. This vision and mission must reflect a commitment to providing inclusive education, where every student has the same rights and opportunities to learn and develop (Khorotunniswah, 2020; Saleha, 2023). Madrasah principals are responsible for developing school policies that support inclusivity (Kultsum,

2020). This includes policies for accepting students with special needs, assessing their progress, and providing additional support (Rahayu, 2020).

Madrasah heads must ensure that teaching staff are actively involved in realizing inclusive concepts. This involves regular training and coaching to improve teachers' skills in teaching and supporting students with special needs. Creating an inclusive school culture is the task of madrasah heads (Novianti, 2019). With the proper guidance from the head, an institution will undoubtedly develop further and be able to produce superior future generations for the nation (Zamroni et al., 2020; Huda & Nada, 2023).

In realizing freedom of learning, the head of MAN 1 Batang Hari Jambi transformed to make MAN 1 Batang Hari an inclusive school based on digital technology. The transformation of an inclusive school based on digital technology was raised by several previous researchers, namely Mala et al. (2022), who said that by adopting a more creative and personalized approach to education through supporting inclusive school transformation based on digital technology because it allows for an educational approach that is more suited to the interests and talents of each student. Then Ahmadi (2022) said that transforming madrasah into inclusive schools based on digital information technology could be the primary driver in realizing the concept of independent learning. It was also emphasized by Alimuddin et al. (2023) that digital information technology can increase educational accessibility, adapt the curriculum according to student needs, and provide opportunities for more excellent independent learning.

With the involvement of madrasa heads in transforming madrasah into inclusive schools based on digital information technology (Wahid et al., 2022), Indonesia can lead the way towards more inclusive, adaptive and independent education. This is a crucial step to ensure that every generation of Indonesian youth has equal access and opportunities to develop according to their potential, making them valuable resources for the progress of the nation and state. The research focuses on how the madrasah head's role transforms in pioneering inclusive schools in realizing freedom of learning at MAN 1 Batang Hari Jambi.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative case study type method by conducting research that aims to describe and analyze the problems that occur (Assyakurrohim et al., 2023). The place of research was MAN 1 Batang Hari Jambi. Researchers collected data through several stages, such as observation and directly observing the research site. Interview: Several informants were interviewed at the research site. Observation, visiting the research site. Documentation study, analyzing documents related to research (Rukajat, 2018).

It can be seen in the table above that the source of information was received from five informants, including the first element, the leader, namely the head of the madrasah. The deputy head of the madrasah, teachers, and employees totalled nine people. The data collection process is carried out in the initial stages of data collection, then reducing the sorted data in the form of notes, displaying the data to understand the data and then drawing conclusions from the data studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The role of madrasah principals is to pioneer inclusive schools by strengthening human resources to realize freedom of learning. In implementing the role of the madrasa head, it involves a series of complex steps and strategies. The following institutional steps in implementing madrasa transformation can be seen in Figure 1 below:
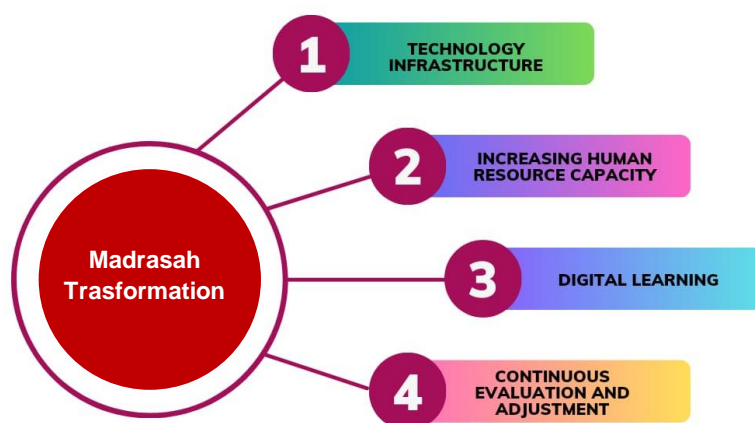

Figure 1. Transformation Steps for MAN 1 Batang Hari Jambi

Technology Infrastructure

Building a solid and reliable technological infrastructure is a crucial first step (Islamy & Mubarok, 2019). Technological infrastructure plays a key role in transforming madrasah into inclusive schools based on digital information technology to realize the concept of independent learning. Technological infrastructure provides everything needed, from a fast internet network to relevant hardware and software. This is a crucial foundation for enabling inclusive, adaptive and independent learning.

As stated by the head of the madrasah, the madrasah transformation is implemented by improving the existing technological infrastructure in the madrasah. This includes installing a fast internet network, adequate hardware (computers, tablets and mobile devices), teacher training, and appropriate software and digital learning platforms.

Improving internet infrastructure is the primary step taken by madrasah in implementing inclusive schools based on digital information technology to realize freedom of learning. A fast and stable internet connection is a prerequisite for accessing digital learning resources, participating in virtual classes, and downloading learning materials. A reliable network will reduce barriers for students and teachers in accessing and participating in online learning (Purba et al., 2023).

Then, madrasah must also be equipped with adequate hardware, such as computers, laptops, tablets and mobile devices. This will ensure that every student can access the devices necessary to participate in online learning. Apart from that, this device is also needed for teachers to compile and manage digital learning materials.

The head of the curriculum emphasized that at the MAN 1 Batang Hari Jambi institution, adequate technological infrastructure has been provided, such as the provision of a WiFi network, projectors, laptops, sound systems, and speakers as learning media, so that the availability of adequate technological infrastructure makes it easier for teachers to apply learning to students. Furthermore, the use of appropriate educational software becomes essential. This includes digital learning platforms, educational applications, and collaborative software. However, at MAN 1 Batang Hari Jambi, no special digital applications are used; teachers are only limited to selecting applications available on digital platforms to be used as educational media for students.

With the availability of adequate technological infrastructure, institutions are more likely to be able to achieve their vision and mission, namely the transformation of madrasah in realizing freedom of learning for students so that the institution will further improve its quality both in terms of implementation of learning and services to students and all components of the madrasah institution.

Increasing Human Resources Capacity

Increasing the capacity of human resources (HR) is an effort made by an organization or country to increase human abilities, knowledge, skills and productivity in a work environment or everyday life. Increasing human resource capacity is crucial in facing rapid changes in today's global world (Hariani, 2019). Increasing the capacity of human resources (HR) is a strategic process that aims to improve the qualifications, skills, knowledge and abilities of individuals or groups in an organization or society. Increasing human resource capacity plays a crucial role in individual development, increasing productivity, and the progress of organizations and society (Islamy & Mubarok, 2019).

In the context of the role of madrasah heads in realizing the transformation of madrasahs into independent learning, empowering teachers and school staff is essential, where training and support are carried out to increase knowledge, especially in the technology field (Sartica, 2016). It was revealed by the head of the school that the institution continuously carries out training for school components to provide provisions so that the school components are ready to apply in the institution. The class 10 homeroom teacher also revealed that teacher or staff training is carried out by sending teachers or staff to attend training or seminars outside the madrasa and sometimes bringing in resource persons to train directly at the madrasa. The form of training is training teachers to understand how to integrate technology into the teaching process effectively, create digital learning materials, and facilitate online or hybrid learning.

Increasing human resource capacity often starts with education and training. Formal education programs and ongoing training help individuals develop new knowledge, update skills, and understand the latest developments in their field (Purwati & Nugraha, 2018). Capacity building includes developing the technical and interpersonal skills necessary for their duties and responsibilities. This can involve training in the use of technology, time management skills, leadership, and interpersonal skills (Effendi, 2014).

It was also said by the informant, namely the class 11 teacher, that the head of the madrasa pays attention to the performance of all school components so that

the head knows the extent of the difficulties experienced by all components, so the head of the madrasa can predict the needs of the components by holding training to increase insight and provide new understanding towards teachers and staff. Career development programs help madrasa components plan and achieve their career goals. This includes competency assessment, determining career paths, and providing training and experience that supports career development.

Teacher training in madrasa transformation and the involvement of school principals in realizing independent learning are essential steps to ensure that educators have the skills and knowledge needed to integrate technology well into the learning process.

Digital Learning

Digital learning refers to using digital technology to support and facilitate learning (Jannah & Atmojo, 2022). In this context, digital technology includes a variety of hardware (such as computers, tablets, and smartphones) and software (such as applications, online learning platforms, and educational games) that are used to convey information and help students learn (Aulinda, 2020). Digital learning is an educational paradigm that utilizes information and communication technology to improve teaching and learning.

The head of the madrasah led a significant transformation in a learning approach that combines educational traditions with technological advances. Classrooms are no longer just filled with textbooks and whiteboards but are full of digital devices, touch screens and internet connections that allow access to a broader world of knowledge. The principal emphasized that the teachers at MAN 1 Batang Hari Jambi understand technology's great potential in supporting the learning process. They use interactive online learning platforms and educational applications to support each student's needs. Each student has a personal digital device to access learning materials, assignments and educational resources.

The class 10 teacher conveyed that in order to strengthen the learning of certain concepts, by the concept of digital learning transformation from the principal, the teacher gave direction to students to be able to access online resources that can be obtained from the internet, such as learning videos, interactive simulations, and learning modules Game based. This makes learning more exciting and allows students to understand the concepts visually and practically.

The homeroom teacher for class 11 and class 12 also explained that the learning carried out at MAN 1 Batang Hari Jambi had indeed implemented digital concepts that were easy to understand and of interest to students. Students from various groups and backgrounds are very enthusiastic about the digital-based learning implemented by teachers. Learning is made exciting and conceptualized like a game plot so students do not get bored and fed up quickly. Several digital learning applications include watching educational videos, playing educational games and involving cartoon animations in implementing learning.

The use of digital media in learning has become a significant trend in modern education. With technological advances, teachers and students can access various digital tools and resources to enhance the learning experience (Hambali,

2021). The Head of Curriculum said that using digital media in implementing independent learning can provide many benefits for education. Merdeka Belajar is an educational concept that allows students to organize their learning according to their interests, talents and needs.

The use of digital media in this context can improve the efficiency, accessibility and quality of education. By combining digital technology with an innovative and inclusive approach, the implementation of Merdeka Belajar can be more effective and relevant in preparing students to face future challenges.

Continuous Evaluation and Adjustment

The transformation of madrasah towards inclusive schools based on digital information technology is running effectively (Fajrini et al., 2020). This allows schools to remain responsive to change, maximize student potential, and achieve the vision of independent learning. Additionally, this process creates a culture of continuous learning, where innovation and improvement are an integral part of education. For this reason, continuous evaluation is needed in adjusting school policies (Munthe, 2015).

The evaluation results improve all aspects of madrasa transformation, including adjusting learning materials, teaching methods, and difficulty levels to meet student needs and achieve the desired learning outcomes. An essential part of the evaluation is measuring the extent to which the madrasah has succeeded in creating an inclusive environment that supports all students, including those with special needs. This evaluation may include monitoring physical accessibility, appropriate educational resources, and adequate support.

It was revealed by the class 11 teacher that ongoing evaluation also includes an assessment of the use of technology in the learning process. This involves assessing the effectiveness of the digital tools and platforms supporting student learning. Furthermore, the madrasa head emphasized that continuous evaluation is always carried out to achieve the school's vision and mission in achieving better change. Madrasah evaluations are carried out monthly by the head of the madrasah either independently or involving the madrasah supervisor.

Continuous evaluation and adjustment are vital elements in transforming madrasah into inclusive schools based on digital information technology in the context of independent learning. This process allows schools to continuously monitor progress, measure the impact of transformation, and make necessary changes to achieve learning goals effectively.

CONCLUSION

School principals play an essential role in shaping the future of inclusive and independent education by integrating digital information technology into education. Through the role of madrasah principals who transform schools to make them inclusive by utilizing digital information technology, education can be accessed by all groups regardless of social, economic, or physical background. In this transformation process, digital information technology functions as a learning tool and a means of creating a dynamic, creative and collaborative learning environment. With access to extensive educational resources via the internet, students and teachers can access knowledge from various sources, deepen

understanding, and develop new skills. MAN 1 Batang Hari Jambi became one of the state madrasah schools that carried out this transformation through the following stages: procurement of adequate technological infrastructure. Second, increase human resource capacity by involving school stakeholders in training or seminars. Third, applying digital learning to all students regardless of background. Fourth, provide ongoing evaluation to determine the success of the program. The madrasa transformation at MAN 1 Batang Hari Jambi has been proven to implement learning freedom for students to learn optimally. They can imply that an inclusive approach and digital information technology can be essential in realizing the "Freedom of Learning" vision in madrasah and the Islamic education sector. However, this implementation cannot be generalized because each institution has different characteristics and cultures, making it possible for future researchers to conduct the same but more comprehensive study.

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