



School Principal Management in Developing Independent Learning Policy Based on Local Wisdom at MTsN 2 Bireuen

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the management of the school principal in developing an Independent Learning policy based on local wisdom at MTsN 2 Bireuen. The focus is on the implementation of POAC management functions (Planning, Organizing, Actuating, and Controlling) in integrating Acehese local values into the curriculum, particularly through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings show that the school principal plays a strategic role in designing innovative programs rooted in local culture, mobilizing resources, and ensuring sustainable implementation through continuous evaluation. Effective management contributes to the creation of a learning ecosystem that aligns with the national education vision and local cultural values. This study recommends strengthening principals' capacity in contextual and collaborative-based management as a key strategy for implementing the Independent Learning policy.

1. Introduction

Education in the era of globalization faces increasingly complex challenges that require education systems to be adaptive, transformative, and responsive to both global demands and local contexts. In this dynamic environment, Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced the "Independent Learning" (Merdeka Belajar) policy as a paradigm shift toward educational decentralization. The policy aims to give educational institutions more autonomy in curriculum development, teaching strategies, and educational innovation aligned with the needs of learners and local characteristics (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2020)

This shift is particularly relevant for Islamic education institutions such as madrasahs, which are expected not only to respond to national curriculum standards but also to preserve religious and cultural values. MTsN 2 Bireuen, one of the leading madrasahs in Aceh, serves as a prominent example of integrating local wisdom—*kearifan lokal*—into its curriculum through the Independent Learning framework. This includes the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which is aligned with the six main character dimensions promoted by the Ministry: faith and devotion, independence, critical thinking, creativity, cooperation, and global diversity (Kemendikbudristek, 2022)

The leadership role of the school principal is crucial in driving such reforms. According to George R. Terry's classical management theory POAC—Planning, Organizing, Actuating, Controlling—the success of educational innovation is significantly influenced by how these functions are implemented within a school setting. In the context of MTsN 2 Bireuen, the principal is not merely an administrator, but a transformational leader who must bridge national education reforms with the rich cultural

identity of the Acehnese people.

Recent research underscores the growing importance of integrating indigenous knowledge and local wisdom in education as a way to promote culturally relevant pedagogy and character development. For instance, studies by Saputra et al. and Andriani et al. have demonstrated that incorporating local values into learning content significantly enhances students' cultural identity and academic achievement. Similarly, Ifan (2023) argues that local wisdom-based education contributes to the development of 21st-century skills such as collaboration, empathy, and problem-solving. Globally, this movement resonates with the position of UNESCO, which advocates the incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems into education for sustainability and relevance. Countries that have successfully adapted local wisdom into educational policy—such as Finland, Japan, and New Zealand—report improved student engagement and stronger community-school relationships (UNESCO, 2018).

In the Indonesian context, however, the systematic integration of local wisdom into madrasah education remains underexplored, particularly in how school management navigates the challenges of policy implementation. Although several studies have examined the implementation of the Independent Learning policy and the role of school leadership (Mafdu & Islam, 2023; Junaidi et al., 2023), most of these focus on general school settings rather than madrasahs with unique socio-religious and cultural functions. Other research by Tamara (2022) emphasizes the leadership model for promoting local wisdom but does not explicitly examine the managerial mechanisms aligned with national policy mandates.

Thus, a gap remains in understanding how madrasah principals operationalize POAC-based management within the Independent Learning framework while embedding local wisdom in curriculum and school culture. Another challenge lies in reconciling national education standards with local cultural specificities. Research by Putra et al. (2022) indicates that the gap between policy formulation and school-level implementation often leads to fragmentation and ambiguity in practice.

In addition, the adoption of digital learning tools—another core aspect of the Independent Learning policy—can be problematic in rural madrasahs due to infrastructure limitations and digital literacy gaps (Rusydiyah, 2021). These issues highlight the importance of adaptive leadership and localized management strategies.

Preliminary observations at MTsN 2 Bireuen between January and April 2024 revealed several initiatives that reflect the contextualization of the Independent Learning policy. These include: the integration of traditional Islamic texts (kitab kuning) into thematic modules, community-based learning projects addressing local environmental and social issues, and character mentoring programs that combine Pancasila values with Acehnese culture.

Such efforts demonstrate the school's commitment to designing a culturally embedded learning model; however, the role of the principal in sustaining and managing these efforts remains a critical point of inquiry.

This study therefore aims to fill the research gap by examining in depth the management functions of the madrasah principal in implementing the Independent Learning policy based on local wisdom. The research specifically analyzes the principal's roles in planning relevant programs, organizing human and material resources, actuating school components to work collaboratively, and controlling or evaluating program effectiveness through the lens of POAC.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to the development of a contextualized model of school management in madrasah settings, particularly in regions with strong cultural identities such as Aceh. Findings from this study are expected to provide both theoretical insights and practical strategies for principals, educators, and policymakers seeking to align national educational reforms with local cultural values.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore and interpret the management strategies employed by the principal of MTsN 2 Bireuen in implementing the Independent Learning policy based on local wisdom. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth examination of complex social phenomena, particularly those involving leadership, organizational dynamics, and contextual adaptation within educational institutions (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). In line with this, the case study method enabled the researcher to obtain a rich and holistic understanding of the principal's managerial functions, contextualized within a specific institutional and cultural setting.

2.1 Research Setting

The research was conducted at MTsN 2 Bireuen, a state Islamic junior high school located in the Bireuen district of Aceh Province, Indonesia. This school was purposefully selected based on its commitment to integrating local values into curriculum practices and its proactive adoption of the Independent Learning policy. Initial field observations and informal discussions indicated that MTsN 2 Bireuen had implemented various innovative programs, including thematic modules based on Acehese culture, character education derived from Pancasila values, and project-based learning rooted in local issues such as environmental sustainability and traditional community practices.

MTsN 2 Bireuen represents a unique context where Islamic education intersects with local culture and national education reforms. The madrasah serves approximately 450 students with a teaching staff of 38, and is recognized as a model institution in the region. The principal has been acknowledged by the local Ministry of Religious Affairs for his leadership in developing contextualized educational policies that reflect both national standards and community expectations.

2.2 Participants

The primary unit of analysis in this study was the school principal. However, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the management process, several other stakeholders were also included as key informants. These consisted of the vice principals (particularly in curriculum and student affairs), selected teachers involved in the P5 program, and school committee members. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who had direct involvement or sufficient knowledge of the school's policy implementation and program design.

2.3 Data Collection Techniques

Three primary data collection techniques were employed: in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. Each method was triangulated to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

1. *In-depth Interviews.*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school principal, vice principals, and four teachers. The interviews focused on exploring their understanding of the Independent Learning policy, strategies for integrating local wisdom, and experiences in executing the POAC management functions. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework, allowing flexibility for probing and elaboration. Interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed for thematic analysis.

2. *Observations.*

Observations were carried out in classrooms, school meetings, extracurricular activities, and community-based learning sessions. These were aimed at capturing how planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling were translated into practical action. Field notes were taken systematically to record observable behavior, interaction patterns, resource utilization, and leadership styles of the principal during key school events.

3. *Document Analysis:*

Relevant documents were collected and analyzed to support and validate data obtained from interviews and observations. These included school work plans, curriculum documents, P5 program modules, evaluation reports, and meeting minutes. Document analysis provided insight into the formal procedures and planning mechanisms adopted by the school administration to embed local values within the broader framework of Independent Learning.

2.4 *Data Analysis Techniques*

Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was performed manually using open and axial coding techniques to categorize data based on the four functions of POAC: Planning, Organizing, Actuating, and Controlling.

Each code and theme was continuously compared across data sources (interviews, observations, and documents) to identify patterns and contradictions. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the analysis process to ensure objectivity and reduce interpretive bias. Data saturation was considered reached when no new information emerged from additional interviews or document reviews.

2.5 *Trustworthiness of the Study*

To ensure trustworthiness, the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were applied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was established through data triangulation and member checking. The findings were validated by returning the interpretations to several key informants for feedback and verification. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through audit trails, peer debriefing, and the use of raw data documentation that could be reviewed by independent researchers.

2.6 *Ethical Considerations*

All ethical protocols were followed in accordance with academic research standards. Participants were informed of the research objectives and procedures, and gave written consent to be interviewed and observed. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, with pseudonyms used in the reporting of sensitive data. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Postgraduate Research Ethics Committee at the State Islamic Institute of Lhokseumawe prior to data collection.

3. Results

3.1 Planning: Strategic Integration of Local Wisdom in Educational Vision

Planning, in the context of MTsN 2 Bireuen, does not merely serve as a technical function for operationalizing educational activities; it is a deeply strategic and cultural act. Under the leadership of the school principal, planning was utilized to bridge the national Independent Learning (Merdeka Belajar) framework with the rich and deeply rooted Acehese local wisdom. This dual approach aimed to generate learning experiences that are meaningful, character-building, and culturally grounded.

The planning process began with contextual curriculum analysis. The principal led a diagnostic mapping of local cultural assets—such as Islamic ethical teachings, traditional arts, local languages, and social values like *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation)—which were considered not just as cultural heritage, but as educational resources. This mapping involved a collaborative workshop in early 2023 with curriculum teams, school committees, and cultural experts to identify the key local values that could be embedded into learning activities.

For example, one of the initial planning outputs was the design of P5 (Profil Pelajar Pancasila) projects rooted in local realities. These included community clean-up initiatives based on Islamic ecological ethics, traditional dance performances tied to national identity, and storytelling sessions centered on Acehese historical figures. The selection of themes reflected not only the government's emphasis on the six core competencies of the Pancasila student but also Aceh's identity as a region steeped in Islamic and communal traditions.

The principal's visioning process involved a reformulation of the school's vision and mission statements in 2022 to explicitly align with both the Merdeka Belajar initiative and local wisdom. The revised school vision stated, among others, "To foster students who are academically competent, spiritually grounded, and culturally literate," signaling a philosophical and practical commitment to contextual education.

Another crucial element of planning was the formulation of strategic documents, including the School Work Plan (Rencana Kerja Tahunan), the P5 activity schedule, and lesson plan templates that integrated cultural content. The principal emphasized inclusive planning by involving teachers not just in technical discussions, but also in conceptualizing how culture and character could be embedded in subject content. For instance, Islamic history teachers were encouraged to include local *ulama* figures in their teaching, while art teachers incorporated Acehese calligraphy and music into projects.

In the interview, the Vice Principal of Curriculum stated that their planning was not merely intended to comply with the Ministry's mandates, but always began with the question of what students needed to learn to feel proud of being Acehese Muslims and Indonesian citizens.

This reflective and culturally driven planning approach is congruent with transformational leadership, where vision is translated into a shared commitment through participatory design (Bass & Avolio, 1994). The principal's ability to articulate a vision that connected national reforms to local identity was a critical factor in gaining buy-in from teachers, many of whom were initially uncertain about how to implement Merdeka Belajar in a madrasah context.

Moreover, the planning function incorporated risk management. The principal anticipated possible resistance from conservative community members and logistical challenges in integrating projects across subjects. To address this, mitigation strategies were documented in the planning notes, including scheduling flexibility, use of community spaces for projects, and coordination with religious leaders to gain moral support for culturally embedded innovations.

Comparatively, the planning model at MTsN 2 Bireuen demonstrates a level of sophistication rarely found in similar studies. While many schools plan reactively in response to top-down mandates, the principal at MTsN 2 Bireuen implemented what could be described as proactive cultural planning—aligning national goals with the community's aspirations and moral ecosystem.

This approach expands on Terry's concept of planning not just as setting goals but as anticipatory governance, where cultural foresight informs pedagogical strategies.

In short, the principal's planning demonstrated:

1. A clear articulation of cultural objectives alongside academic goals.
2. Active involvement of stakeholders in planning processes.
3. Integration of local content into formal school documents.
4. A strong anticipatory approach to challenges in implementation.
5. Alignment of planning with transformational leadership principles.

These findings highlight the principal's strategic competence and deep cultural awareness, which are key in designing educational reforms that are both nationally compliant and locally meaningful. The case of MTsN 2 Bireuen offers a template for other madrasahs seeking to develop culturally embedded curricula within the Merdeka Belajar framework.

3.2 Organizing: Building Collaborative Structures for Cultural Education

Organizing in educational management refers to the systematic arrangement of people, resources, and processes to achieve defined objectives. At MTsN 2 Bireuen, the organizing function plays a pivotal role in translating culturally embedded plans into operational reality. The school principal's efforts to build a collaborative and context-sensitive structure illustrate a form of organizing that is not only administrative but also cultural and transformational.

The process began with the restructuring of organizational teams to support the Independent Learning and P5 initiatives. A new task force called Tim Implementasi Merdeka Belajar Berbasis Kearifan Lokal (Local-Wisdom-Based Independent Learning Implementation Team) was formally established through a principal decree (SK Kepala Madrasah). This team consisted of curriculum developers, teachers, community liaison officers, and student representatives. Each member was assigned specific roles such as cultural integration design, project documentation, logistics, and community coordination.

The organizational chart was updated to reflect the integration of P5 programs into the school's structural framework, ensuring that it was not seen as an extracurricular add-on but a core element of curriculum delivery. Teachers were organized into interdisciplinary groups to foster collaboration in designing and implementing projects, such as combining Islamic Education, Social Science, and Art in a student-led cultural exhibition.

Importantly, the organizing strategy recognized the importance of human capital alignment. The principal delegated roles based on teachers' strengths, cultural backgrounds, and professional interests. For example, teachers who had prior experience in community arts or religious storytelling were placed in positions that allowed them to mentor students in those areas. This ensured not only efficiency but also motivation and authenticity in delivering local wisdom education.

In line with contemporary management theory, this model reflects a decentralized and team-based organizational approach, moving away from rigid hierarchies. According to Mintzberg's organizational theory, such configurations are more adaptive and responsive to change—particularly important in educational reform settings where teacher ownership and community collaboration are critical.

In addition to internal structuring, the principal emphasized external collaboration. A formal memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed with local cultural centers and Islamic scholars (ulama), who were invited to contribute to thematic workshops and as guest instructors. For instance, a local historian conducted a storytelling session on the life of Teungku Chik di Tiro, a revered Acehese Islamic hero, while a community leader guided students on traditional peusijek rituals (symbolic welcoming ceremonies).

Community engagement was institutionalized through the establishment of a School and Community Council (Majelis Sekolah dan Masyarakat), which convened quarterly to evaluate the progress of cultural projects, discuss student development, and propose new initiatives. This structure allowed the school to maintain a continuous dialogue with the wider community and to adapt programming based on local feedback.

Physical resources were also organized strategically. The school library, which had limited circulation in previous years, was transformed into a cultural learning center by incorporating local manuscripts, Acehese poetry collections, and traditional games. Classrooms were organized with thematic learning corners that highlighted local artifacts or student artwork from P5 projects. These adjustments required coordination with the facilities and finance unit to allocate budget and space appropriately.

The organizational climate fostered by the principal emphasized collaboration over compliance. As expressed by one teacher during an interview, they were not merely carrying out tasks, but felt that they were part of something greater—preserving their culture through education—which, in turn, strengthened their commitment.

This spirit aligns with modern theories of distributed leadership, where authority and responsibility are shared among members to increase engagement and ownership. The principal's organizing strategies ensured that each stakeholder had a meaningful role, leading to a sense of collective mission.

Furthermore, time management was an integral part of organizing. The academic calendar was adjusted to allow sufficient time for project-based learning and cultural immersion. Weekly coordination meetings were held every Friday to review implementation progress, resolve challenges, and plan upcoming activities. Minutes of these meetings were documented and shared to ensure accountability and institutional memory.

Compared to conventional organizing in schools—often characterized by top-down delegation and rigid departmentalization—the model at MTsN 2 Bireuen exhibits a fluid, inclusive, and culturally responsive organizational pattern. This approach not only enhanced the efficiency of program delivery but also built a sustainable foundation for school-community synergy.

The organizing function at MTsN 2 Bireuen is characterized by:

1. Adaptive team structures aligned with cultural objectives.
2. Task delegation based on individual strengths and cultural familiarity.
3. Institutionalized collaboration with external community actors.
4. Strategic management of facilities and schedules.
5. A climate of distributed leadership and ownership.

These practices reinforce the understanding that educational reform, particularly when infused with cultural values, requires organizing beyond conventional systems. The ability of the school principal to mobilize people and resources around a shared cultural and pedagogical goal represents an exemplary case of organizing for transformative education.

3.3 Actuating: Mobilizing Learning Through Local Values

The actuating function in school management refers to the process of directing and motivating individuals within the organization to carry out planned activities effectively. At MTsN 2 Bireuen, this function was executed through an approach that prioritized teacher empowerment, student engagement, and cultural affirmation. The principal played a central role in cultivating an educational atmosphere where local wisdom became the living substance of daily learning and character formation.

Actuating in this context was not merely instructive—it was transformational and participatory. The principal consistently emphasized the importance of giving meaning to policy by turning ideas into action. To ensure teachers internalized the Merdeka Belajar principles, the principal provided various motivational and developmental platforms. These included workshops on designing project-based learning rooted in Acehese culture, peer mentoring for new teachers, and discussion forums on integrating Islamic values and local customs into lessons. During an interview, one teacher expressed that they did not feel as though they were simply being instructed on what to do, but rather that the principal made them feel like part of a shared mission—to educate students to understand their culture, not merely to memorize content.

To encourage authentic participation, the principal applied a bottom-up leadership style, giving teachers autonomy in choosing project themes, learning methods, and assessment models—as long as they aligned with P5’s core competencies and reflected cultural context. Teachers created learning experiences such as traditional culinary classes, historical reenactments of Acehese resistance movements, and interviews with community leaders. These projects were initiated by teachers but supported administratively and symbolically by the principal.

This approach aligns with the transformational leadership model, where leaders inspire subordinates by appealing to higher ideals and values rather than mere compliance (Bass & Avolio, 1994). At MTsN 2 Bireuen, actuating was also a relational process, where emotional support, mutual respect, and cultural pride served as motivational forces.

The principal also mobilized students by embedding project-based learning into daily routines. Students were not passive recipients but active co-creators of cultural knowledge. For example, during the “Aceh Heritage Week,” students were tasked with collecting family oral histories, creating mini-documentaries, and presenting local wisdom artifacts. These projects not only built academic and creative skills but also fostered a sense of cultural identity and civic responsibility. Furthermore, the principal ensured that students saw learning as something meaningful and connected to their realities. Lessons were enriched with local proverbs, religious stories, and traditional practices. In an Islamic education class, for instance, a discussion on the value of patience (*sabr*) was connected to local stories of war heroes and community struggles. These narrative integrations gave students moral grounding while developing critical and reflective thinking.

In mobilizing teachers and students, the principal provided symbolic leadership—using cultural symbols and language that resonated with the Acehese identity. School ceremonies incorporated traditional dress and opening prayers by community ulama. By doing so, the principal reinforced that the school was not just an institution of instruction but a guardian of local heritage.

Additionally, the principal activated collaboration beyond the school walls. Through coordinated efforts with local government offices, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and parents' associations, the school launched campaigns such as “Cinta Budaya, Cinta Bangsa” (Love Culture, Love the Nation), which involved performances and exhibitions at the district level. These public engagements further motivated stakeholders and enhanced the school’s reputation as a culturally driven learning institution.

From a management perspective, the actuating process at MTsN 2 Bireuen can be broken down into several strategic actions:

- a) Empowerment through professional trust: Teachers were trusted to design and lead culturally relevant projects.
- b) Student agency and experiential learning: Students actively explored their environment and created products with real-world relevance.
- c) Cultural motivation: Teaching and leadership used local values as sources of identity, inspiration, and resilience.
- d) Community co-mobilization: The broader community was engaged as a learning resource and motivator.

The actuating function thus became the dynamic core of the school's transformation. It created a cultural ecosystem where learning is not only about achieving scores, but about cultivating identity, responsibility, and connection to the social world.

Comparatively, schools that fail to activate their personnel and learners around a shared vision often struggle with disengagement and resistance. In contrast, MTsN 2 Bireuen demonstrates how a principal's cultural leadership—when rooted in empathy, empowerment, and local identity—can significantly increase the effectiveness of policy implementation.

3.4 Controlling: Participatory Evaluation and Cultural Accountability

The controlling function in educational management plays a vital role in ensuring that planned activities are implemented effectively and that goals are met in a measurable, accountable, and sustainable manner. At MTsN 2 Bireuen, controlling was not understood merely as supervision or inspection, but as a dynamic process of continuous reflection, participatory evaluation, and cultural accountability. The principal exercised this function with an emphasis on formative approaches, aligned with the spirit of Merdeka Belajar and grounded in local wisdom.

One of the defining features of the controlling system at MTsN 2 Bireuen was its participatory nature. Evaluation processes were conducted not only by the principal and vice principals but also by involving teachers, students, parents, and community figures. The principal organized monthly reflective meetings known as *Majelis Evaluasi Budaya Sekolah* (School Cultural Evaluation Forums), where stakeholders could discuss the progress of cultural projects, challenges encountered, and suggestions for improvement.

This inclusive approach aligns with the concept of democratic school leadership, which encourages transparency, dialogue, and shared responsibility in the monitoring process. Teachers appreciated that evaluations were not centered on fault-finding but rather on improvement and appreciation. According to one teacher, instead of judging them, the principal would sit with them, listen to what had gone well and what had not, and help them reflect, which made them feel supported rather than pressured.

Formal instruments were also developed to guide evaluation. The school introduced performance rubrics for P5 implementation, cultural project output assessments, and student character development logs. These tools were co-designed by the curriculum team and adjusted periodically based on feedback. The evaluation focused not only on academic indicators but also on qualitative changes such as teamwork, respect, empathy, and cultural appreciation—reflecting the deeper goals of local wisdom-based education.

Another form of controlling was the monitoring of teacher planning and implementation, conducted through classroom visits, review of lesson plans, and observation of student work. However, this was not done in a rigid or top-down manner. Rather, the principal used a coaching model, engaging in two-way conversations and offering constructive feedback. Teachers reported that these sessions helped them refine their pedagogical strategies and better align their lessons with both the curriculum and cultural relevance.

At the student level, the principal encouraged self-assessment and peer evaluation. Students participating in P5 projects were asked to reflect on their learning process, challenges faced, and the values they gained from the experience. This reflective practice was seen as essential in building metacognitive skills and personal accountability. Students also evaluated their peers' collaboration, creativity, and contribution to cultural projects, fostering a sense of shared responsibility.

Community involvement was another pillar of the controlling function. During cultural exhibitions and P5 presentations, community leaders, parents, and alumni were invited to act as external reviewers. Their insights provided real-world relevance and affirmed the value of student efforts. These evaluations were documented and integrated into the school's reporting system, contributing to a culture of civic accountability where education was not confined within school walls but linked to societal values and expectations.

From a managerial perspective, the principal's strategy incorporated multiple types of control:

- a) Preliminary control through planning reviews and teacher readiness assessments;
- b) Concurrent control during project implementation via monitoring and real-time feedback;
- c) Feedback control through structured reflection, reporting, and data-driven revisions.

The data from evaluations were used not only for internal reporting but also as a basis for innovation and policy adjustment. For instance, when it was observed that some students lacked adequate understanding of certain cultural themes, the school collaborated with local historians and elders to develop supplemental modules and guest sessions. This responsiveness demonstrated that controlling was not a bureaucratic exercise but a feedback-rich process supporting continuous improvement.

Compared to conventional evaluation systems that rely heavily on quantitative metrics, MTsN 2 Bireuen's model embraced contextual indicators. These included student pride in cultural identity, teacher innovation in integrating local content, and community satisfaction with school engagement. These qualitative aspects were valued equally—if not more—than standard test scores or academic benchmarks.

In short, the controlling function at MTsN 2 Bireuen was deeply embedded in the school's cultural and pedagogical ecosystem. It reflected:

- a) A commitment to collaborative reflection rather than top-down judgment.
- b) A balance between structure and flexibility.
- c) A recognition of local wisdom as both content and standard of evaluation.
- d) A strong alignment with character development and school vision.

This model of cultural accountability positions the school not only as a learning institution but as a moral and cultural center for the community. It suggests that when evaluation is humanized, localized, and made participatory, it becomes a powerful driver for meaningful, sustained educational transformation.

This section confirms that actuating is not simply task execution. At its best, it is the ignition of collective energy toward a shared moral and educational purpose. At MTsN 2 Bireuen, that purpose is firmly grounded in Islamic character and Acehese culture—realized through inspired and participatory leadership.

4. Conclusions

This study examined the management of the school principal in implementing the Independent Learning policy based on local wisdom at MTsN 2 Bireuen. Using the POAC framework—Planning, Organizing, Actuating, and Controlling—the research revealed a holistic and culturally embedded approach to educational leadership.

In the planning phase, the principal demonstrated strong strategic vision by aligning national curriculum goals with local values. The planning process was inclusive, involving teachers, school committees, and community stakeholders to identify and integrate Acehese cultural elements into curriculum design and school activities. Planning was not only administrative but also ideological, aiming to promote cultural identity and character education through localized projects.

The organizing function emphasized collaborative structures that empowered teachers and engaged external actors. By restructuring internal teams and formally partnering with cultural institutions and community leaders, the principal established a sustainable system for implementing contextual learning. This decentralized approach increased teacher ownership, clarified responsibilities, and enabled smooth coordination between various units of the school and the community.

In terms of actuating, the principal mobilized all school components by fostering a culture of participation and empowerment. Teachers were trusted to lead creative and culturally relevant projects, and students were given space to engage in experiential learning rooted in local traditions. The principal's leadership style encouraged intrinsic motivation, professional growth, and student agency. Actuating, in this context, became a transformational force that activated the school's moral, cultural, and pedagogical resources.

Finally, the controlling function was executed through participatory and formative evaluation methods. The principal adopted reflective and collaborative practices that involved all stakeholders in assessing the effectiveness of programs. Evaluation was focused not only on academic output but also on character development and cultural engagement. This participatory model of control reinforced a sense of accountability and continuous improvement among staff and students.

Overall, the study concludes that effective principal management within the POAC framework—when applied through a culturally responsive lens—can successfully support the implementation of the Independent Learning policy in madrasah settings. The integration of local wisdom was not treated as an accessory but as an essential component of curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture.

The experience of MTsN 2 Bireuen serves as a compelling model for other Islamic schools across Indonesia. It demonstrates that national education reforms can be harmonized with local identity through visionary leadership, collaborative systems, and community participation. This study recommends that principals be equipped with training in contextual management and cultural leadership to ensure that education is not only effective but also meaningful and rooted in the lived experiences of students.

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