

Leadership and Teacher Engagement in Collaborative Curriculum Implementation: Evidence from Indonesia

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ABSTRACT. Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia requires a strong collaborative culture among educational stakeholders to ensure effective learning outcomes. This study aims to analyse how leadership and teacher engagement shape collaborative curriculum implementation in senior high schools. Using a qualitative design with an interpretive approach, data were obtained from interviews with principals, vice-principals, teachers, and students, supported by observation and document analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the data. The findings indicate that collaborative leadership fosters curriculum effectiveness through open communication, shared responsibility, participatory decision-making, and collective problem-solving. Teacher engagement plays a pivotal role in strengthening collaboration and maintaining consistency in curriculum execution. Nonetheless, challenges such as differing perceptions, workload imbalance, and limited time allocation hinder optimal collaboration. The study concludes that leadership collaboration and teacher engagement are critical drivers of successful curriculum implementation. Theoretically, this research contributes to the understanding of collaborative leadership in educational reform, while practically, it provides insights for school leaders to develop sustainable professional collaboration frameworks within the Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: *Collaborative leadership, Quality education, Sustainable educational practices, Teacher engagement*

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INTRODUCTION

Educational transformation in Indonesia is entering a decisive phase with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, designed to promote flexible, student-centred, and contextually relevant learning (Kurniawan, 2023; Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Panjaitan et al., 2025). As part of the national reform agenda, this curriculum reflects the government's commitment to cultivating independent, creative, and collaborative learners who can adapt to rapid technological and social changes. Nevertheless, the success of such transformation depends not only on curriculum design but also on how effectively schools establish a collaborative culture that unites leaders, teachers, and students in shared pedagogical goals (Voogt et al., 2018; Goode et al., 2018; Kartika, 2024)

Since Indonesia's independence, curriculum reforms have been carried out periodically to align education with societal development. The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced in 2022, represents a paradigm shift from centralised, prescriptive instruction toward greater autonomy and flexibility in teaching and learning (Triwiyanto et al., 2024). Teachers are encouraged to contextualise learning materials, while schools are given greater authority in curriculum management (Ainissyifa et al., 2024; Nurhasanah et al., 2025; Ramli et al., 2025). However, the Ministry of Education, Culture,

Research, and Technology reported that over 82% of schools still face serious challenges in its implementation, particularly regarding coordination among stakeholders, time allocation, and resource distribution (Fauzan et al., 2023; Ndari & Mahmudah, 2023).

Although collaboration is repeatedly emphasised in national education policy, its practical application within schools often encounters obstacles. Many teachers still operate individually, and leadership styles in schools, especially in rural areas, tend to be hierarchical (Sofa et al., 2012; Hariri et al., 2016; Sumintono et al., 2019; Aziz et al., 2022; Karim et al., 2025). Consequently, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum often fails to achieve the expected level of coherence and sustainability. This raises a critical question: How can a collaborative culture facilitate the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian secondary schools that struggle with coordination and limited resources?

Previous studies on curriculum reform in Indonesia have mainly concentrated on curriculum content analysis or individual teacher competency (Gulo et al., 2024; Mulkan & Zunnun, 2024). However, empirical investigations into how leadership and teacher engagement jointly foster collaborative practices in curriculum implementation remain limited. Furthermore, studies applying collaborative governance theory (Aditya & Kusumastuti, 2023; Christensen, 2024) and organisational culture theory (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2024) in the Indonesian educational context are scarce, particularly at the secondary level. This study addresses that gap by examining how these collaborative principles are enacted within the day-to-day management of curriculum implementation.

Global and national evidence consistently highlights the importance of collaboration for improving the quality of education. Studies show that schools with a strong collaborative culture achieve better teacher professional development and student learning outcomes (Khasawneh et al., 2023; McChesney & Cross, 2023; Zhao, 2024). In Indonesia, empirical findings indicate that teacher collaboration improves instructional innovation and curriculum alignment (Budirahayu & Saud, 2023). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that fostering a collaborative culture is a strategic way to strengthen the implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

This study is situated in SMA Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, a public secondary school in a rural area of Sumatra, Indonesia. The school represents a typical case of institutions striving to implement the Merdeka Curriculum amid structural and cultural constraints, including limited resources, workload imbalance, and varying teacher readiness. Understanding how collaborative leadership and teacher engagement operate within such a context provides valuable insights for scaling curriculum reforms across diverse Indonesian schools.

Grounded in collaborative governance and organisational culture theories, this study aims to analyse the roles of leadership and teacher engagement in fostering a collaborative culture to support the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the secondary level. Specifically, it seeks to (1) explore collaborative practices in curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation; (2) identify challenges that hinder collaboration; and (3) formulate practical strategies to strengthen participatory leadership and teacher collaboration. By presenting empirical findings from the Indonesian context, this article enriches the theoretical understanding of collaborative governance in education and offers practical recommendations for policymakers and school leaders to institutionalise sustainable collaborative practices within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design within an interpretive–constructivist paradigm, which assumes that educational realities are socially constructed through stakeholders' interactions and shared meanings. This approach aligns with the study's objective to examine how collaborative culture is enacted and experienced in curriculum implementation at the school level.

The research was conducted at a public high school in South Bengkulu, Indonesia, selected purposively for its pioneering role in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and its consistent emphasis on collaborative educational practices.

The participants consisted of sixteen individuals representing key stakeholder groups: one principal, one vice-principal for curriculum affairs, eight teachers from various subject areas, and six students from grades 10 to 12. The sample was selected using purposive sampling based on involvement in the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, teaching experience, and active engagement in collaborative activities. Data saturation was reached when no new information or themes emerged from the data. This ensured that the sample size was sufficient to provide credible and meaningful insights into the research focus.

Selection criteria for teacher participants included: (1) minimum 3 years teaching experience, (2) direct involvement in Merdeka Curriculum implementation, (3) participation in collaborative planning activities, and (4) willingness to participate in research. Student participants were selected based on academic performance, diversity, and active engagement in school activities. Table 1 provides detailed demographic information about research participants, demonstrating representativeness across stakeholder groups and ensuring credibility of findings.

Table 1: Research Participant Demographics and Characteristics

Participant Group	N	Gender (M/F)	Experience (Years)	Education Level	Subject Area
Principal	1	M	15	Master's	Administration
Vice-Principal	1	F	12	Master's	Curriculum
Teachers	8	5M/3F	3-18 (M=8.5)	Bachelor's/Master's	Math, Science, Language, Social Studies, Arts, PE
Students	6	3M/3F	Grade 10-12	-	Science Track, Social Track, Language Track, Arts Track
Total	16	9M/7F	-	-	-

Data collection employed multiple methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of collaborative culture. Data were collected over three months through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and was conducted using open-ended questions that encouraged participants to elaborate on their perceptions and experiences of collaborative culture. Observations were conducted during curriculum planning meetings, coordination sessions, and school-based discussions to capture authentic collaborative behaviours and communication patterns. Meanwhile, relevant documents, including policy guidelines, meeting minutes, and curriculum reports, were analysed to provide institutional context and triangulate the interview and observation data. Table 2 summarises the systematic approach to data collection, demonstrating methodological rigour through the triangulation of multiple data sources and an extended fieldwork duration.

Table 2: Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Method	Duration	Frequency	Participants	Data Volume	Purpose
In-depth Interviews	45-90 minutes	Once per participant	All 16 participants	24-hour audio recording	Explore perceptions and experiences of collaborative culture
Participant Observation	2-3 hours per session	15 sessions over 3 months	School activities	40 hours of field notes	Observe collaborative behaviours and interactions
Document Analysis	Ongoing	Throughout the study period	Policy documents, reports	150+ documents	Analyse formal collaborative structures and outcomes
Total Data Collection	3 months	-	16 participants	64+ hours + 150 docs	Triangulated understanding

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021), comprising data familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, review, and definition. NVivo 12 software was utilised to facilitate systematic coding and ensure consistency across data sources. Investigator triangulation was implemented by involving two researchers in independent coding, followed by discussions to reach consensus on emerging themes. Figure 1 demonstrates the systematic approach to data collection and analysis, ensuring methodological rigour and validity through multiple triangulation strategies.

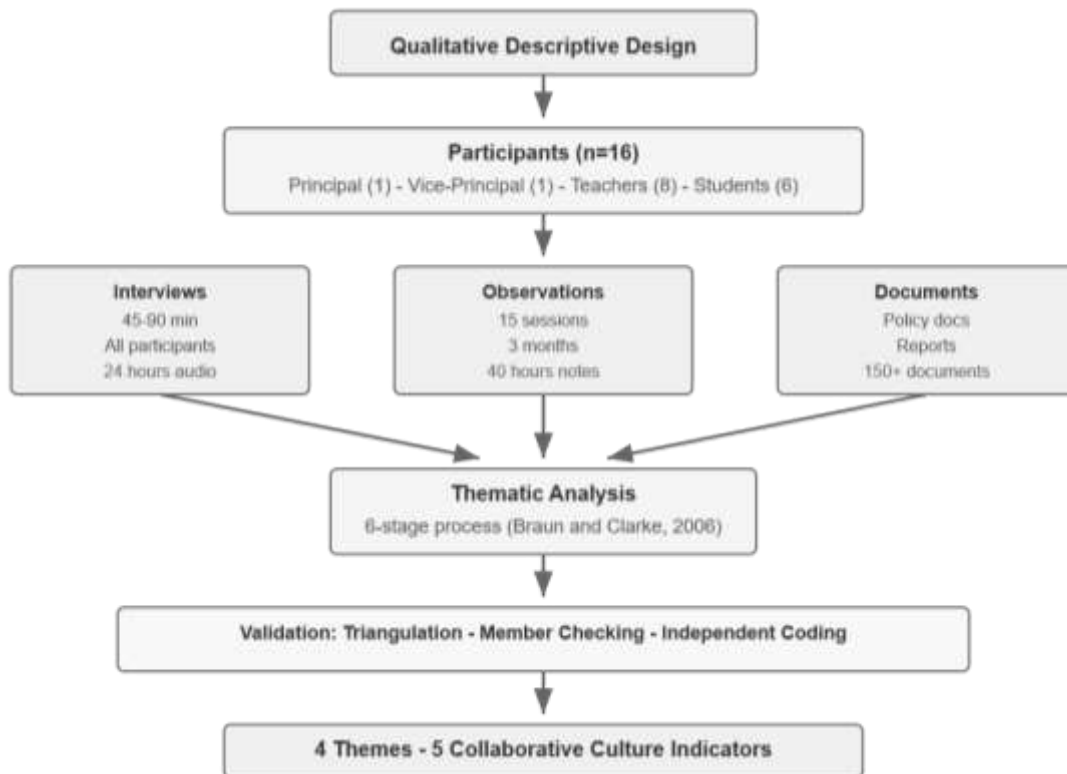


Figure 1: Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

The reliability of the findings was determined based on the Lincoln and Guba criteria as cited by Birt et al. (2016) and Ahmed (2024), including reliability through prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking; transferability through rich contextual description; dependability via detailed audit trails; and confirmability through reflexive documentation and peer debriefing (Enworo, 2023). Member checking was conducted both orally and in written form, allowing participants to review transcript accuracy and provide feedback on preliminary interpretations to strengthen the validity of the analysis. All research procedures adhered to ethical standards approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Bengkulu. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, participation was entirely voluntary, and all data were securely stored to protect sensitive information.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings reveal that the implementation of collaborative culture in curriculum management at the studied high school demonstrates systematic integration of stakeholder participation across the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases. Table 3 presents the

comprehensive thematic analysis results, showing the systematic emergence of collaborative culture themes across different stakeholder groups and implementation phases.

Table 3: Collaborative Culture Themes, Sub-themes, and Supporting Evidence

Main Theme	Sub-themes	Key Indicators	Participant Sources	Document Evidence
Planning Phase Collaboration	Stakeholder involvement: Joint curriculum design, Resource coordination	Regular planning meetings, Cross-curricular integration, Shared responsibility in lesson planning	P1, VP1, T1, T2, T4, T7	Meeting minutes, curriculum documents, planning schedules
Implementation Practices	Team teaching approaches, Peer observation and feedback, Student collaborative learning	Co-instruction activities, Structured feedback mechanisms, Project-based group work	All teachers (T1-T8), All students (S1-S6)	Lesson plans, observation forms, student project reports
Evaluation Mechanisms	Collective assessment design, Reflective practice sessions, Data-driven decision making	Joint rubric development, Post-instruction reflection, Collaborative data analysis	P1, VP1, T1-T8	Assessment rubrics, reflection logs, and performance reports
Challenges and Barriers	Time and scheduling constraints, Individual work preferences, Resource and technology limitations	Heavy administrative workload, Resistance to collaborative change, Insufficient digital platforms	All participants (P1, VP1, T1-T8, S1-S6)	Policy documents, workload reports, and technology assessments

Table 4 provides a systematic assessment of how Huxham's five collaborative culture indicators manifest across different phases of curriculum implementation, offering evidence-based evaluation of collaborative practices.

Table 4: Implementation Level of Collaborative Culture Indicators

Huxham's Collaborative Indicators	Planning Phase	Implementation Phase	Evaluation Phase	Overall Assessment	Supporting Evidence
Effective Interaction	High	Moderate	High	Strong	Regular stakeholder meetings, cross-departmental coordination, and structured communication
Open Communication	High	High	Moderate	Strong	Formal/informal channels, transparent information sharing, and feedback mechanisms
Responsibility Sharing	Moderate	High	High	Strong	Precise role distribution, shared accountability, collaborative task assignment.
Participatory Leadership	High	Moderate	High	Strong	The principal facilitates participation, encourages teacher agency, and supports distributed decision-making.
Collective Problem-Solving	Moderate	High	High	Strong	Joint solution development, collaborative challenge addressing, systematic problem identification

Planning Phase Collaboration

Collaborative planning is characterised by inclusive stakeholder participation, structured communication, and shared responsibility in lesson design. Regular curriculum meetings and interdisciplinary discussions facilitate the alignment of teaching objectives across subjects. Teachers collaborate in developing integrated lesson plans and share resources under the coordination of the principal and vice-principal. Student input is incorporated through class representatives and focus groups, primarily to provide feedback on learning needs and project themes. However,

student participation remains procedural rather than fully embedded in the decision-making process. As one teacher noted, “*Students’ ideas are collected and considered, but the final decision still lies with teachers.*”

Implementation Practices

Collaborative implementation is most evident through team-teaching approaches, operationally defined as structured co-instruction in which two or more teachers jointly plan, deliver, and evaluate a single learning unit. These practices enhance cross-disciplinary integration, such as when science and mathematics teachers co-develop data analysis projects using environmental data. Teachers also participate in peer observation and feedback sessions, enabling reflective improvement and shared pedagogical learning. Meanwhile, students engage in project-based learning that encourages teamwork, though the assessment of collaboration skills varies among subjects.

Evaluation Mechanisms

Collaborative evaluation involves collective design of assessment rubrics, reflective discussions after instructional units, and joint analysis of student performance data. These activities demonstrate growing institutional commitment to shared accountability and data-informed decision-making. Student feedback is gathered through surveys and informal discussions, representing student input and serving as a structured mechanism for incorporating learner perspectives into evaluation and curriculum adjustments.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite these advances, several obstacles hinder the full realisation of a collaborative culture. Time constraints and workload pressures limit opportunities for collective planning. Variations in digital competence and access to technological tools create disparities in participation. Some teachers maintain individualistic work habits, perceiving collaboration as an additional burden. Hierarchical decision structures occasionally constrain open dialogue, particularly when administrative authority overrides consensus.

Summary of Collaborative Indicators

Across all phases, Huxham’s collaborative indicators of effective interaction, open communication, responsibility sharing, participatory leadership, and collective problem-solving are evident to varying degrees. Effective interaction and open communication are firmly established through formal and informal meetings. Responsibility sharing and participatory leadership are increasingly institutionalised, though constrained by hierarchical norms. Collective problem-solving shows consistent progress, particularly in team-based project design and collaborative evaluation.

Overall, the empirical evidence indicates that collaborative culture in curriculum implementation is emerging as an integral component of school management, supported by leadership commitment and stakeholder engagement. However, sustained development will require ongoing structural support and stronger inclusion of students as active contributors within the collaborative framework. Strategic technology adoption can enhance collaborative practices through improved communication, resource sharing, and coordination tools. However, technology implementation must be accompanied by appropriate training and technical support. School policies and procedures should explicitly support and incentivise collaborative practices while removing barriers that discourage stakeholder participation in educational decision-making processes.

Discussion

This study explores how collaborative culture manifests across three essential stages of curriculum implementation planning, implementation, and evaluation at SMA Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan within the context of the Merdeka curriculum. The discussion critically analyses the findings through the theoretical lens of Huxham's collaboration framework, which emphasises five indicators: effective interaction, open communication, shared responsibility, participatory leadership, and collaborative problem-solving (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). While the findings generally reveal a positive, systematic culture of collaboration, several inconsistencies and contextual challenges suggest that collaboration in practice remains uneven and is often constrained by structural and cultural factors.

The findings indicate that collaborative culture during learning planning is actively encouraged through regular curriculum meetings and teamwork initiatives. Teachers, vice principals, and school leaders are involved in participatory decision-making processes, which align with studies emphasising that structured collaboration enhances innovation and ownership in curriculum design (Voogt et al., 2018; Zitha et al., 2023). However, critical examination of the primary data reveals disparities in engagement. Some teachers tend to rely on habitual planning routines rather than active creation, suggesting that collaboration is often compliance-oriented rather than genuinely transformative. These findings resonate with Goertzen et al. (2023), who highlight that teacher workload, limited time, and lack of trust hinder deep collaboration despite supportive leadership.

Open communication in planning forums promotes transparency and mutual understanding, as supported by studies on communication protocols that improve organisational cohesion (Al Hakim & Sigita, 2025; Orazani et al., 2023). Nevertheless, not all teachers perceive these communication channels as inclusive. Interviews indicate that junior teachers sometimes hesitate to express opinions in front of senior staff, illustrating hierarchical communication barriers still present in school culture. This contradiction underscores that, in practice, open communication does not automatically translate into equitable dialogue.

Shared responsibility, while generally distributed by expertise, can occasionally result in an unequal workload. Senior teachers frequently take on more responsibilities in mentoring or leading discussions, which can lead to fatigue and resistance over time. Such findings confirm that without institutional recognition and workload compensation, the sustainability of collaborative initiatives is at risk (Griffiths et al., 2021; Jessiman et al., 2022). Thus, while the school demonstrates an operational model of shared responsibility, it remains fragile and dependent on individual motivation rather than structural reinforcement.

In the implementation phase, collaborative practices such as team teaching, cross-subject projects, and reflective discussions signify progress toward the ideals of the Merdeka curriculum. These practices foster professional learning communities and strengthen inter-teacher dialogue (Decuyper et al., 2023). However, closer analysis reveals significant variations in practice. Some teachers enthusiastically adopt collaborative models, while others continue to rely on conventional, individual-centred methods. This inconsistency reflects a partial cultural shift where collaboration is valued rhetorically but unevenly enacted. A similar study found that the absence of continuous institutional support and training limits the depth of collaborative learning (Okolie et al., 2022).

Open communication during learning implementation contributes positively to classroom climate, promoting trust and student engagement (Amerstorfer & Münster-Kistner, 2021; Khuhro, 2024). Nevertheless, several teachers reported difficulties maintaining open dialogue when facing large class sizes and tight curriculum schedules. Moreover, students' participation levels in collaborative learning vary widely, suggesting that not all learners benefit equally from these practices. These cases illustrate the limits of collaboration when contextual constraints—such as infrastructure, time, and teacher readiness are not systematically addressed.

Participatory leadership emerges as a central enabler of collaboration, yet its effectiveness depends heavily on consistent school management. While some decisions are made collectively, others remain top-down due to administrative urgency. These findings indicate that participatory leadership requires balancing inclusivity with efficiency (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022; Sebunya & Gichuki, 2024). Thus, while SMA Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan demonstrates commendable efforts, the collaborative leadership model still needs to be institutionalised to ensure long-term sustainability.

The evaluation stage reveals a mature yet imperfect collaborative culture. Teachers, vice principals, and students engage in reflection forums that align with the principles of communities of practice (Antinluoma et al., 2021; Pashmforoosh et al., 2023). However, some teachers still perceive evaluation as an administrative obligation rather than a learning opportunity. This finding echoes the resistance who argue that traditional evaluation mindsets often conflict with collaborative principles of reflection and improvement (Chew & Mohamed Zainal, 2024; Mejía et al., 2023). While open communication and shared responsibility in evaluation contribute to mutual trust and improved learning quality, resistance to sharing student performance data remains evident. Some teachers express concerns about being judged by peers, leading to selective transparency. This defensive behaviour limits collective learning and underscores the need for psychological safety in professional collaboration (Ratiu et al., 2025). Furthermore, student involvement in evaluation, though present, remains incidental rather than systematic. Expanding student participation could enhance ownership and accountability in the evaluation process.

The findings confirm earlier research emphasising the significance of collaborative culture in improving teacher professionalism and school quality (García-Martínez et al., 2021). Internationally, schools with high collaboration indices outperform others in problem-solving and innovation (Tang et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023). However, this research also identifies counter-cases where collaboration faltered due to conflicting interests, lack of follow-up, or limited administrative support. For example, during curriculum evaluation, some collaborative meetings devolved into one-way reporting sessions rather than genuine dialogues. These negative instances strengthen the study's credibility by illustrating that collaboration is not inherently successful and requires conducive structures, time, and trust to thrive.

Theoretically, this research validates Huxham's framework within the Indonesian context, showing that the five indicators of collaboration, while applicable, require contextual adaptation to align with local school dynamics (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). The findings contribute to the discourse on how transformational and participatory leadership intersect with professional learning communities to shape sustainable collaboration. In practice, the study proposes a contextual model integrating digital communication platforms, shared mentoring structures, and structured reflection systems as mechanisms to sustain a collaborative culture within the Merdeka curriculum framework.

From a policy standpoint, schools need formalised collaboration mechanisms embedded within curriculum implementation guidelines. This includes scheduled cross-subject meetings, digital resource-sharing systems, and structured teacher reflection forums. Policymakers should consider developing national frameworks that incentivise collaboration by adjusting workloads, implementing recognition systems, and providing leadership training. Without such systemic support, collaboration risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. While this study provides rich insights, its single-case design limits the generalizability of findings. Future research should adopt comparative or longitudinal approaches across diverse school contexts to assess the sustainability of collaborative culture over time. Additionally, further exploration of integrating digital and AI-supported collaboration tools could offer innovative pathways to strengthen curriculum implementation in Indonesian schools.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the objective of analysing how collaborative culture is manifested and sustained in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan has been achieved, demonstrating that collaboration is systematically embedded across the stages of curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation. The findings reveal that five key indicators—effective interaction, open communication, shared responsibility, participatory leadership, and collaborative problem-solving—jointly enhance teacher professionalism, organisational cohesion, and learning quality, while also showing that the success of curriculum implementation depends not only on structural policy support but also on the continuity and depth of interpersonal collaboration among stakeholders. The study further extends Huxham's collaboration framework by contextualising it within Indonesian secondary education and provides a practical model for collaborative curriculum implementation that integrates digital communication, distributed leadership, and structured reflection mechanisms. These contributions imply the importance of embedding collaboration as a core principle in curriculum policy, professional development, and educational leadership programmes to ensure its sustainability as a professional culture. Acknowledging its limitation as a single-site case study, the research recommends future studies involving multiple schools in different regions or employing longitudinal and mixed-method approaches, as well as exploring the use of digital and AI-assisted collaboration tools to enhance coordination, efficiency, and innovation in curriculum management.

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