

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AS A CATALYST FOR TEACHER PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

Taslim Buaja^{1*}, Nurfaia Abdullah², Djulaiha Abubakar³, Siti Hartina⁴, Sumarni Sahjat⁵

¹²³⁴⁵ Universitas Muhammadiyah Maluku Utara, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: taslimsaidbuaja@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Educational leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping school quality, especially in contexts with limited resources. In Indonesia, despite ongoing reforms, many public schools still struggle with gaps in teacher performance due to weak coordination, insufficient recognition, and minimal external support. This study aims to explore the relationship between instructional leadership by the principal and teacher performance at State Elementary School 33 in Ternate City. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to capture contextual realities and leadership dynamics. The findings reveal that effective instructional leadership—defined by classroom supervision, recognition of teacher efforts, collaborative decision-making, and strategic resource management—positively influences teacher motivation, administrative compliance, and instructional quality. Teachers responded positively to the principal's hands-on leadership and participatory approach, while supervision cycles and administrative support enhanced accountability. The study concludes that even in funding-constrained environments, instructional leadership remains a key driver of school improvement. Its strength lies in fostering a collaborative school culture, aligning teacher practices with national standards, and supporting continuous professional growth. The results offer valuable insights for school leaders, policymakers, and educational researchers seeking practical leadership strategies to enhance teaching quality in similar socio-educational contexts. Future studies are encouraged to adopt a longitudinal design and expand the sample to include comparative analyses across diverse regions and school types.

Keywords: Collaboration, Instructional Leadership, School Management, Teacher Performance, Qualitative Research.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a fundamental role in shaping individuals' abilities, character, and national civilization. In Indonesia, the national education system is designed not only to produce intelligent citizens but also to foster people who are pious, possess noble character, and are responsible members of a democratic society (Buaja et al., 2021). At the core of this process is the principal, a pivotal figure in school leadership and management, whose role is central to improving the quality of education (Windasari et al., 2022). Schools, as educational organizations, continually face a variety of challenges, such as limited resources, teacher performance issues, administrative inefficiencies, and diverse student needs. As organizations that depend on leadership for vision and direction, schools rely on principals to navigate these obstacles and create environments conducive to learning and teaching excellence (Bush, 2020). The success or failure of educational institutions is often attributed to the effectiveness of school leadership, particularly in how principals empower and motivate teachers, manage resources, and address day-to-day problems (Leithwood et al., 2020). As the primary micro-managers of education, principals are tasked with ensuring effective teaching and learning processes while simultaneously serving as role models for both staff and students (Julaiha, 2019). In the Indonesian context, this role is further accentuated by expectations that principals must exhibit exemplary leadership, foster a positive school culture, and inspire continuous professional growth among teachers (Rahayu, 2018).

Despite ongoing educational reforms and investments in professional development, there remains a persistent gap between desired and actual teacher performance in many schools (Satria et al., 2019). Field observations and empirical studies have identified several core issues: insufficient principal-teacher

coordination, limited recognition for teacher achievements, lack of teacher participation in school leadership, and inadequate external funding to support innovation and professional development (Restu Rahayu & Sofyan Iskandar, 2023; Sahjat & Buaja, 2022). These challenges have led to suboptimal teacher motivation, inefficient teaching and learning processes, and diminished educational outcomes (Hallinger, 2018). As a general solution, scholars and practitioners alike have advocated for strengthening instructional leadership practices among principals. Instructional leadership refers to the behaviors and actions of school leaders aimed directly at improving teaching quality and student achievement (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). The general consensus is that when principals provide clear direction, support teacher professional development, recognize achievements, and actively engage teachers in decision-making, teacher performance improves (Day et al., 2016). However, the successful application of these principles depends on contextual factors, including leadership style, school culture, and resource availability.

Numerous studies emphasize that instructional leadership—particularly that exercised by principals—has a direct and significant impact on teacher performance (Leithwood et al., 2020; Bush, 2020). Hallinger and Murphy (1985) conceptualize instructional leadership as comprising three key dimensions: defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate. Each dimension involves specific actions, such as setting clear goals, supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating curriculum, and fostering teacher professional growth. Research conducted by Supovitz, Sirinides, and May (2010) reveals that principals who frequently engage in classroom observations, provide constructive feedback, and facilitate ongoing professional development create a more effective and supportive teaching environment. Similarly, Day et al. (2016) found that instructional leaders who build trust, encourage teacher collaboration, and acknowledge exemplary practices positively influence teacher motivation and classroom performance. Furthermore, the literature suggests that principals' efforts to empower teachers through participative decision-making and distributed leadership not only enhance teacher job satisfaction but also lead to improved student outcomes (Louis et al., 2010; Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). Recognizing teachers' achievements and fostering open communication channels have been identified as critical factors for sustaining high teacher morale and performance (Harris, 2014).

Although the positive impact of instructional leadership on teacher performance is well-documented globally (Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020), several gaps persist in the existing literature, particularly within the Indonesian context. First, much of the research on instructional leadership has been conducted in Western countries with relatively well-resourced school systems, limiting the generalizability of findings to resource-constrained settings like many Indonesian public schools (Louis et al., 2010; Bush, 2020). Second, while previous studies acknowledge the importance of principal–teacher coordination and professional recognition, they often overlook the practical challenges faced by principals in integrating these practices amid administrative constraints and insufficient funding (Sahjat & Buaja, 2022). Moreover, there is limited empirical research that directly examines the pathways through which principals' leadership behaviors influence teacher performance in Indonesian elementary schools, particularly in the face of funding limitations and contextual challenges (Restu Rahayu & Sofyan Iskandar, 2023). Additionally, few studies have explored the effectiveness of non-monetary incentives and intrinsic motivational strategies as alternatives to traditional forms of teacher recognition in environments where financial rewards are constrained (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). Another identified gap is the lack of longitudinal data capturing how sustained instructional leadership practices translate into long-term improvements in teacher performance and student outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by providing a nuanced analysis of the principal's instructional leadership role in improving teacher performance at SD Negeri 33 Kota Ternate. The research examines both the internal (coordination, recognition, participation) and external (funding, community support) factors influencing this dynamic, using a mixed-methods approach to gain comprehensive insights.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the relationship between instructional leadership exercised by the principal and teacher performance at SD Negeri 33 Kota Ternate. The research aims to identify key leadership practices that effectively enhance teacher motivation, professionalism, and instructional quality, especially within the constraints of limited funding and resources. The study further explores the extent to which principal–teacher coordination, teacher recognition, and participatory

leadership influence the teaching and learning process. The novelty of this research lies in its context-specific focus on Indonesian public elementary schools, where funding constraints and organizational complexities present unique challenges for instructional leadership. Unlike most existing studies, this research integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms through which principals' leadership behaviors impact teacher performance. Based on the literature review and preliminary observations, the study hypothesizes that effective instructional leadership—characterized by clear goal-setting, active supervision, recognition of teacher achievements, and inclusive decision-making—positively influences teacher performance even when external funding is limited. This hypothesis is justified by prior empirical findings but is tested here in a contextually distinct environment with its own unique challenges (Leithwood et al., 2020; Bush, 2020). The scope of the study is delimited to SD Negeri 33 Kota Ternate, focusing on the micro-level interactions between the principal and teachers. While the findings may have implications for broader educational policy and leadership practice, the research remains grounded in the specific institutional, cultural, and resource realities of the selected school.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is particularly well-suited for exploring educational phenomena within their natural settings and for obtaining rich, context-specific insights (Maxwell, 2013). In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for both data collection and analysis, facilitating a nuanced understanding of processes, experiences, and perspectives as they occur in real-world contexts. An inductive analytical approach was adopted, allowing theoretical frameworks to guide the interpretation of findings as they emerged from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The setting for this research was State Elementary School 33 in Ternate City, with the principal acting as the primary leader and teachers functioning as both instructional implementers and mentors. The study focused on the practice of instructional leadership and its impact on teacher performance within this school environment.

Data Collection Techniques

To strengthen the validity of the findings and ensure comprehensive data coverage, the study employed multiple data collection techniques: interviews, observations, and document analysis. Each of these techniques contributed to data triangulation, thereby increasing the credibility and depth of the results.

Interviews. The interview process involved semi-structured sessions with both the principal and selected teachers. This approach was chosen for its capacity to provide in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding instructional leadership and teacher performance (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Semi-structured interviews facilitated both consistency in questioning and flexibility in probing further into responses, allowing researchers to gather rich, nuanced information from a relatively small group of informants. Table 1 illustrates the interview respondents and the focus areas explored, with the principal questioned on leadership, vision, and strategies for teacher development, while teachers discussed implementation, classroom challenges, motivation, collaboration, and professional growth.

Observations. Observations were conducted using both participant and non-participant strategies, and included both structured and unstructured protocols. Through direct observation, the researcher was able to witness natural behaviors and interactions among school stakeholders, capturing authentic data on instructional practices and school culture without artificial manipulation (Guest et al., 2013). The focus of observations included leadership practices during meetings or instructional supervision, teacher interactions in classrooms and staff meetings, overall school climate, collegiality, and the use of instructional materials and technology. Data from observations were systematically recorded using field notes and observational checklists. Figure 1 conceptually illustrates the observational flow, beginning from the school environment and principal activities, moving through instructional supervision, and culminating in teacher performance and collaboration.

Document Analysis. Document analysis was also conducted to complement the interviews and observations. Documents are essential in qualitative research as they serve as records of both past and present events, helping to verify and enrich findings from other data sources (Bowen, 2009; Sugiyono, 2015). The documents reviewed in this study consisted primarily of class administration records, such as lesson plans (RPP), syllabi, annual and semester programs (Prota and Promes), and attendance records. These documents were analyzed to cross-check the completeness and accuracy of school administrative practices, and to examine their consistency with the instructional leadership approaches practiced at the school. Table 2 summarizes the types of documents reviewed and their respective uses, such as checking the consistency of lesson planning, assessing curriculum alignment, reviewing planning documents, monitoring attendance, and evaluating action plans based on meeting minutes.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis process was conducted using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved several systematic steps: familiarizing with the data by reading and re-reading interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents; coding by identifying meaningful units of information and assigning relevant codes; developing themes by grouping related codes into broader categories reflecting key aspects of instructional leadership and teacher performance; and triangulation by comparing findings across interviews, observations, and documents to enhance validity (Patton, 2015). The final step involved interpreting and synthesizing the themes in light of relevant theories and the research questions.

Validity and Reliability Strategies

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, several quality assurance strategies were implemented. The study emphasized credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These strategies included triangulation of data sources and methods, member checking by asking informants to verify key findings, peer debriefing through discussions with colleagues for feedback, and providing thick descriptions of the research setting and processes to facilitate contextual understanding and transferability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of the study, assured of confidentiality, and provided informed consent prior to participation. To further safeguard participant anonymity, all data were anonymized and any identifying information was omitted from the final research report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Principal Leadership

Schools are educational institutions composed of various interrelated components, including the principal, teachers, students, administrative staff, school committee, environment, and curriculum elements such as teaching materials, learning methods, and instructional media (Usman, 2015). These components are expected to work synergistically in order to achieve the ideal goal of a school: the realization of quality education. Leaders in an organization hold a critical role in guiding and influencing their subordinates. Without a figure to manage and direct the organization, its mission and vision would be difficult to realize effectively. Therefore, the presence of a capable leader is essential to ensure that organizational processes are aligned with institutional goals (Humano et al., 2017). According to the Regulation of the Minister of National Education No. 28 of 2010 concerning the assignment of school principals, the principal functions as both a leader and a manager in the school. This regulation underscores the principal's crucial role in realizing the school's vision and mission (Syafaruddin et al., 2020). The development of educational organizations, including SD Negeri 33 Kota Ternate as a formal institution, is largely determined by the quality of the principal's leadership. As a leader, the principal is required to design, plan, and organize the

implementation of programs aimed at improving educational quality. This role is illustrated by an interview with Mrs. Rugaya Ismail, S.Pd., a class teacher with approximately 13 years of experience. She stated:

“The principal’s leadership has been quite optimal, particularly in supervising the teaching and learning process. The principal always monitors classroom activities, and when a teacher is absent, he assigns other teachers to take over the class. During the pandemic, the principal continued coordinating with teachers through WhatsApp groups and monitored both online and offline teaching activities.”

This statement is supported by Mrs. Nurhasni Limatahu, A.Ma., a teacher with three years of experience, who explained:

“The principal always monitors the Teaching and Learning Activities (KBM) in the classroom. If there are any irregularities, they are discussed in meetings. Teachers are also encouraged to provide suggestions during these discussions.”

These accounts illustrate the principal’s effective leadership in ensuring the smooth implementation of classroom learning and facilitating participatory decision-making.

Further reinforcement came from Mrs. Meylani Iran, S.Pd., who emphasized the principal’s response to facility limitations:

“When students lack learning materials, the principal instructs us to distribute the needed books. If resources are insufficient, BOS funds are used to procure them. The principal has also planned to expand the school building to accommodate the growing number of students.”

Additionally, Mrs. Elia Umasangadji, S.Pd., a teacher with over 10 years of experience, stated:

“In cases of student-teacher conflict or behavioral issues, the principal provides direct counseling and mediation.”

Complementing these observations, Mrs. Sumiati AR Djamrud reflected on pre-pandemic leadership:

“Before the pandemic, the principal supported many extracurricular activities and even encouraged students to participate in district competitions, where they won prizes in arts and culture.”

In summary, the leadership of the principal at SD Negeri 33 Kota Ternate is viewed as strong and effective. The principal demonstrates collaborative leadership, open communication, and a proactive approach to program implementation and resource management. He prioritizes transparent governance and promotes a culture of accountability in line with the school’s vision of continuous improvement.

Teacher Performance

Teacher performance refers to the outcomes achieved by teachers in delivering instruction, as defined by national educational standards. Based on the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 22 of 2016 on process standards for elementary and secondary education, teacher performance includes planning the learning process, assessing learning outcomes, and supervising instructional activities (Djibat, 2017). The success of a school is often closely tied to how well teachers perform their duties, making performance evaluation an essential aspect of educational quality assurance (Satria et al., 2019).

In the case of SD Negeri 33 Kota Ternate, the principal acknowledged the important contribution of teachers. Mrs. Norma Husen, S.Pd., the principal, stated:

“During my 8 years of service at this school, the teachers have always responded positively to my leadership and participated actively.”

This response reflects a strong collaborative relationship between the school leadership and the teaching staff. As emphasized by Kurniawati et al. (2020), principals must serve not only as managers but also as mentors and exemplary figures for teachers, encouraging them to grow professionally.

Regarding efforts to improve teacher capacity, Mrs. Norma Husen noted:

“When I first arrived in 2013, teacher quality was relatively low. But over time, improvements have been made in teacher assignments and professional development.”

This observation indicates that teacher performance is closely linked to leadership intervention and continuous resource investment. It also emphasizes the importance of collaboration between leadership and teaching staff to enhance professional competencies.

When asked about factors hindering teacher performance, the principal explained:

“We follow directives from the Education Office. Although most teachers perform well and meet the eight competencies required by the government, there are occasional lapses in administrative tasks or discipline. These issues are addressed during evaluation meetings.”

These eight teacher competencies, which include pedagogical, professional, social, and personal skills, serve as benchmarks for professional performance and are critical in forming a competent and effective teaching workforce (Simatupang et al., 2023).

In addition to administrative supervision, the principal supports teacher performance through the provision of necessary learning tools and documentation. As she stated:

“Administrative equipment for teachers is very complete—lesson plans (RPP), syllabi, annual and semester programs (Prota and Promes), and attendance records. If anything is incomplete, I immediately instruct the responsible teacher to complete it.”

Effective leadership includes not only monitoring but also supplying the necessary tools and support structures for successful teaching. A supportive environment enables teachers to perform their tasks optimally, which in turn enhances student outcomes.

Furthermore, the principal highlighted her role as a supervisor in formal evaluations:

“Every three months, I or the Education Office conduct supervision to assess teacher performance in the classroom.”

This cyclical supervision model ensures that teacher performance is continuously monitored, providing timely feedback and professional growth opportunities. As Minsih et al. (2019) note, structured supervision enhances accountability and supports teacher development aligned with national competency standards. In conclusion, the principal’s leadership at SD Negeri 33 Kota Ternate exemplifies effective educational management. Through active supervision, responsive communication, and strategic support, the principal has successfully fostered a collaborative culture that prioritizes professional growth and instructional excellence. The alignment of leadership practices with national competency frameworks underscores the critical role of the principal in enhancing teacher performance and, ultimately, the quality of education.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the relationship between principal instructional leadership and teacher performance at SD Negeri 33 Kota Ternate. The core findings highlight that effective leadership—characterized by supervision, resource management, recognition, and participatory decision-making—has significantly contributed to enhancing teacher motivation, professional competence, and classroom effectiveness. Through interviews and observations, it was found that the principal consistently played a central role in improving teaching quality by supporting administrative completeness, facilitating ongoing supervision, and fostering a collaborative school culture. The study contributes to the body of educational leadership research by offering empirical insights into how instructional leadership operates in resource-constrained Indonesian public schools, demonstrating that even under funding limitations, strong principal leadership can drive measurable improvements in teacher performance and overall school quality.

REFERENCES

- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Buaja, T., Wiyono, B., & Timan, A. (2021). Development of quality schools based on Joguru values: Principal leadership. *OSF Preprints*, 1841–1853. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/M46BR>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Djibat, B. (2017). The development of quality schools based on local wisdom in Ternate North Maluku. *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, 6(5), 5–9. <http://www.ijstr.org/final-print/may2017/The-Development-Of-Quality-Schools-Based-On-Local-Wisdom-In-Ternate-North-Maluku.pdf>
- Guest, G., Namey, E. E., & Mitchell, M. L. (2013). *Collecting qualitative data: A field manual for applied research*. SAGE Publications.
- Hidayat Sutisna, S., Rozak, A., & Renanda Saputra, W. (2023). The role of the principal in improving the quality of school education. *JiIP - Scientific Journal of Educational Sciences*, 6(9), 6895–6902. <https://doi.org/10.54371/jiip.v6i9.2718>
- Humano, J. P., Hasim, R., Rajaloe, N. I., & Yusuf, M. (2017). Human resource management of educators by the Ternate City Education Office. *Humano*, 8(2), 123–136.
- Julaiha, S. (2019). Principal leadership concept. *Tarbiyah Wa Ta'lim: Journal of Educational and Learning Research*, 6(3), 179–190. <https://doi.org/10.21093/twt.v6i3.1734>
- Kurniawati, E., Arafat, Y., & Puspita, Y. (2020). The role of principal leadership in improving the quality of education through school-based management. *Journal of Education Research*, 1(2), 134–137. <https://doi.org/10.37985/joe.v1i2.12>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Minsih, M., Rusnilawati, R., & Mujahid, I. (2019). Principal leadership in building quality schools in elementary schools. *Elementary Education Profession*, 1(1), 29–40. <https://doi.org/10.23917/ppd.v1i1.8467>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Rahayu, R. S. (2018). Implementation of transformational leadership of elementary school principals. *Journal of Educational Management and Supervision*, 2(3), 192–201. <https://doi.org/10.17977/um025v2i32018p192>
- Restu Rahayu, & Iskandar, S. (2023). Transformational leadership of principals in 21st century learning in elementary schools. *Jurnal Elementaria Edukasia*, 6(2), 287–297. <https://doi.org/10.31949/jee.v6i2.5484>

- Sahjat, S., & Buaja, T. (2022). The role of principals in excellent school learning management: A case study at SD Negeri 2 Ternate City. *International Journal of Elementary Education*, 11(4), 108–116. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijeeedu.20221104.14>
- Satria, R., Supriyanto, A., Timan, A., & Adha, M. A. (2019). Improving school quality through public relations management. *Journal of Educational Management Accountability*, 7(2), 199–207. <https://doi.org/10.21831/amp.v7i2.26018>
- Simatupang, R. M., Anggriany, N., & Fitri, D. (2023). Analysis of the role of principal leadership in improving the quality of education in schools. *Algebra: Journal of Education, Social and Science*, 3(3), 174–179. <https://doi.org/10.58432/algebra.v3i3.771>
- Syafaruddin, Napitupulu, D. S., & Harahap, A. S. (2020). Interpersonal communication of the principal in decision making and quality improvement at Al-Ulum High School, Medan City. *Journal of Islamic Education*, 9(1), 227–238.
- Usman, H. (2015). Instructional leadership model of school principals. *Jurnal Cakrawala Pendidikan*, 3(3), 634–642. <https://doi.org/10.21831/cp.v3i3.7338>
- Windasari, W., Roesminingsih, E., & Trihantoyo, S. (2022). The influence of principal transformational leadership on elementary school organizational change. *Kelola: Journal of Educational Management*, 9(1), 99–110. <https://doi.org/10.24246/j.jk.2022.v9.i1.p99-110>