

The Role of Principal Leadership and Teacher Performance in Enhancing Student Competitiveness at MTs Negeri 1 Empat Lawang

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran kepemimpinan kepala madrasah dan kinerja guru dalam meningkatkan daya saing siswa di MTs Negeri 1 Empat Lawang. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan desain studi lapangan. Partisipan penelitian terdiri atas kepala madrasah dan guru yang dipilih sebagai informan utama. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan studi dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model analisis interaktif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa praktik kepemimpinan yang bersifat transformasional dan suportif berkontribusi terhadap penguatan manajemen pembelajaran dan supervisi akademik. Kinerja guru tercermin dalam penerapan pembelajaran berbasis kompetensi serta kegiatan pengembangan siswa. Praktik tersebut berkaitan dengan peningkatan prestasi akademik dan nonakademik siswa. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kepemimpinan yang efektif dan kinerja guru yang konsisten mendukung terciptanya lingkungan pendidikan yang lebih kompetitif di madrasah.

Kata kunci: Kepemimpinan kepala madrasah, kinerja guru, daya saing siswa, mutu pendidikan, pendidikan madrasah

Abstract

This study aimed to examine the role of principal leadership and teacher performance in enhancing student competitiveness at MTs Negeri 1 Empat Lawang. A descriptive qualitative approach with a field study design was employed. The participants included the principal and teachers selected as key informants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, and were analyzed using an interactive data analysis model. The findings indicated that transformational and supportive leadership practices contributed to strengthening instructional management and academic supervision. Teacher performance was reflected in the implementation of competency-based learning and student development activities. These practices were associated with improvements in students' academic and non-academic achievements. The study concluded that effective leadership combined with consistent teacher performance supported the development of a more competitive educational environment within the madrasah.

Keywords: Principal leadership, teacher performance, student competitiveness, educational quality, madrasah education

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions today operate within environments characterized by rapid transformation, heightened accountability demands, and increasing public scrutiny. Schools are no longer evaluated solely based on compliance with administrative regulations but on their ability to demonstrate measurable academic outcomes, institutional effectiveness, and sustained competitiveness. Research in educational leadership has consistently shown that school improvement is strongly influenced by the quality of leadership practices and organizational coherence (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019). Empirical evidence from large-scale studies confirms that principal leadership contributes significantly to student achievement, both directly and indirectly, through its influence on teacher performance and school climate (Karadağ, 2019; Grissom et al., 2021). These findings

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position leadership not merely as a managerial function, but as a strategic mechanism for shaping institutional competitiveness.

In contemporary educational discourse, instructional leadership has emerged as a critical framework for improving learning processes. Principals who actively engage in curriculum supervision, teacher mentoring, and professional dialogue are more likely to cultivate instructional alignment and collaborative professionalism (McGhee & Stark, 2021; Shen et al., 2020). Transformational leadership approaches, characterized by shared vision, supportive engagement, and participatory governance, have been associated with higher teacher motivation and stronger institutional commitment (Çoban & Yalçın, 2023; Kaya, 2023). Such leadership practices foster professional growth and organizational stability, which in turn support improved student performance.

Teacher performance remains a central determinant of educational quality and student competitiveness. Teachers directly shape classroom learning experiences through instructional planning, pedagogical strategies, and assessment practices. Research indicates that teacher effectiveness has a substantial impact on student academic progress and long-term learning outcomes (Shen et al., 2020; Gemnafle & Batlolona, 2021). Continuous professional development and constructive supervision further enhance pedagogical competence and instructional consistency (Maolana & Kurniawan, 2022; Muspawi, 2019). Consequently, the synergy between principal leadership and teacher performance becomes a decisive element in institutional development.

The relationship between leadership and teacher performance is not isolated from broader governance frameworks. In Indonesia, educational reforms have strengthened accountability systems and clarified professional responsibilities for principals and educators. Regulatory instruments issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology emphasize competency standards, workload regulations, and structured supervision mechanisms (Kemendikbudristek, 2024). These regulations aim to standardize leadership practices and enhance teacher professionalism. However, policy frameworks alone do not guarantee improved competitiveness. Effective implementation requires leadership commitment, organizational coordination, and professional culture (Sabariah, 2021; Rahayuningsih & Rijanto, 2022).

The notion of educational competitiveness has evolved beyond examination scores. Competitiveness now includes institutional reputation, student achievements in academic and non-academic domains, and community trust. Studies suggest that leadership practices influence not only internal performance but also external perceptions of institutional quality (Noviantini & Harmonika, 2021; Wetipo & Paling, 2021). School effectiveness is therefore shaped by both instructional outcomes and stakeholder engagement. In this context, competitiveness reflects the institution's capacity to maintain quality standards while responding to societal expectations.

Global educational reports highlight the importance of adaptability in maintaining competitiveness. Digital transformation has redefined instructional methods, communication patterns, and governance systems (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Leadership readiness and institutional digital capacity influence how effectively schools respond to technological changes (Timotheou et al., 2023; Pacheco et al., 2025). Schools that demonstrate adaptive leadership and professional collaboration are better positioned to integrate digital innovation

into instructional practices. Conversely, limited coordination and inadequate professional support may weaken institutional competitiveness.

Within madrasah institutions, leadership assumes a dual function that integrates academic management with value-based education. Islamic educational management emphasizes the integration of cognitive development with character formation (Jaelani et al., 2020; Limbong et al., 2022). Madrasah leaders are therefore required to balance professional management practices with religious and moral objectives. Effective leadership contributes to institutional credibility and public trust, which influence student enrollment trends and educational sustainability (Noviantini & Harmonika, 2021; Wetipo & Paling, 2021). Competitiveness in madrasah settings thus encompasses academic achievement, character development, and institutional reputation.

Although numerous studies have examined principal leadership and teacher performance, many focus on quantitative associations without exploring contextual dynamics. Meta-analyses provide statistical confirmation of leadership effects (Karadağ, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019), yet they often overlook how leadership strategies are enacted in everyday institutional practice. Qualitative investigations are necessary to capture lived experiences, professional interactions, and contextual challenges within specific school environments (Çoban & Yalçın, 2023; Kaya, 2023). In Indonesia, research on school management has emphasized collaborative learning organizations and institutional development (Riswandi et al., 2021; Sabariah, 2021), but limited attention has been given to the integrated role of principal leadership and teacher performance in shaping student competitiveness within madrasah contexts.

MTs Negeri 1 Empat Lawang represents a regional madrasah operating within competitive enrollment conditions and evolving performance expectations. Preliminary observations indicated that leadership initiatives were implemented to strengthen instructional quality and extracurricular engagement. Teachers participated in competency-based learning and student development activities. However, systematic investigation was needed to examine how leadership practices and teacher performance interacted to enhance student competitiveness. Institutional coordination, professional development mechanisms, and resource management may influence the sustainability of such efforts.

Understanding these dynamics requires a research approach capable of capturing institutional complexity and contextual nuance. Qualitative inquiry enables in-depth exploration of leadership behaviors, professional practices, and organizational interaction patterns within natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Miles et al., 2020). Through thematic analysis and iterative interpretation, researchers can identify patterns that explain how competitiveness is constructed at the school level (Saldaña, 2021). This methodological orientation provides a comprehensive perspective that complements existing quantitative findings.

Given the theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence discussed above, there remains a need for a contextual investigation that integrates principal leadership and teacher performance as interconnected variables influencing student competitiveness in a madrasah environment. This study therefore sought to analyze how leadership practices were implemented, how teacher performance supported instructional quality, and how the interaction between these elements contributed to enhancing student competitiveness at MTs Negeri 1 Empat Lawang.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design. The qualitative design was chosen because the research aimed to explore and understand how principal leadership and teacher performance were enacted within a specific institutional context and how these practices contributed to enhancing student competitiveness. Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to examine social interactions, leadership practices, and professional dynamics in their natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The case study design was considered appropriate because the research focused on one madrasah as a bounded system that required in-depth contextual exploration (Miles et al., 2020).

The research was conducted at MTs Negeri 1 Empat Lawang. The primary data sources consisted of the madrasah principal and selected teachers who were directly involved in academic management, instructional implementation, and student development programs. Participants were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research focus. Purposive sampling enables the researcher to obtain information-rich participants who possess direct experience related to the phenomenon being studied (Saldaña, 2021). Secondary data were obtained from institutional documents, including school work programs, supervision records, student achievement reports, and documentation of extracurricular activities.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation review. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather detailed information regarding leadership strategies, instructional supervision, teacher performance practices, and efforts to strengthen student competitiveness. Interviews provide opportunities to explore participants' perspectives and experiences comprehensively (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Observation was carried out to examine leadership interactions, classroom practices, and institutional activities within their natural environment. Observational data allowed the researcher to identify patterns of interaction and implementation that may not be fully captured through interviews alone (Miles et al., 2020). Documentation analysis was used to verify and complement information obtained from interviews and observations.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, data triangulation was applied by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was conducted by confirming key interpretations with participants to ensure that the researcher's understanding accurately reflected their perspectives. These procedures were intended to reduce bias and strengthen the validity of the findings.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. The analysis process began with organizing and transcribing interview data and field notes. The researcher then conducted coding to identify meaningful units related to leadership roles, teacher performance, and student competitiveness. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, which were further interpreted to construct themes that explained the interaction between leadership and teacher performance in enhancing institutional competitiveness. The analysis was carried out iteratively to ensure consistency between empirical data and the research objectives (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on the qualitative descriptive case study conducted at MTs Negeri 1 Empat Lawang, the findings were generated through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in three major themes related to principal leadership and teacher performance in enhancing student competitiveness: (1) strategic instructional leadership, (2) professional teacher engagement, and (3) collaborative institutional culture.

1. Strategic Instructional Leadership

The principal demonstrated a structured leadership approach by formulating clear institutional goals focusing on academic excellence and character development. Interview data revealed that annual work programs were aligned with measurable performance indicators, such as student achievement in district competitions and religious-based character programs. Observation results confirmed that the principal consistently communicated these targets during coordination meetings and supervision sessions. Documentation analysis (school work plans and supervision reports) showed systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Instructional supervision was conducted regularly through classroom observations, lesson plan reviews, and reflective meetings. Teachers reported receiving constructive feedback aimed at improving instructional strategies and student engagement. Field notes indicated that supervision was dialogical rather than judgmental, fostering professional reflection.

2. Professional Teacher Engagement

The second theme relates to teacher performance in implementing competency-based instruction. Interview findings showed that teachers prepared structured lesson plans, integrated formative assessment strategies, and actively mentored students for competitions. Observations in classrooms demonstrated interactive teaching methods and student-centered activities.

Teachers were also involved in extracurricular coaching programs designed to enhance student competitiveness beyond academic examinations. Documentation of student achievement records confirmed increased participation in academic and non-academic competitions at the district level.

3. Collaborative Institutional Culture

The third theme highlights institutional collaboration. The principal facilitated teamwork among teachers through regular meetings and joint planning sessions. Teachers expressed that shared responsibility in organizing programs strengthened collegial relationships. Observational data revealed open communication patterns between leadership and staff.

However, the findings also identified contextual constraints, including limited instructional facilities and uneven workload distribution. These factors influenced the consistency of program implementation, although teachers demonstrated adaptive strategies to maintain program continuity.

Overall, student competitiveness was reflected in improved academic performance, broader participation in competitions, and increased community trust in the madrasah.

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative case study confirm that principal leadership functions as a strategic and instructional catalyst within the institutional context. The emphasis on goal alignment, supervision, and structured monitoring supports the argument that effective school leadership directly influences teaching quality and student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2019; Grissom et al., 2021). In this study, leadership was not merely administrative but instructional in nature, aligning with the concept of instructional leadership that prioritizes teaching and learning processes.

The implementation of dialogical supervision observed in MTs Negeri 1 Empat Lawang is consistent with research suggesting that reflective supervision enhances pedagogical improvement and professional growth (McGhee & Stark, 2021). Regular feedback sessions contributed to professional accountability while maintaining collegial trust. This finding aligns with Miles et al. (2020), who emphasize that leadership effectiveness in qualitative contexts emerges through interactional processes rather than hierarchical control.

Teacher performance emerged as a critical mediating factor between leadership strategy and student competitiveness. The study supports previous findings that structured lesson preparation, formative assessment, and extracurricular mentoring significantly contribute to student achievement (Shen et al., 2020; Gemnafle & Batlolona, 2021). Competitiveness in this madrasah context extended beyond examination scores to include participation in religious, academic, and character-based programs, reflecting a holistic understanding of student development.

Furthermore, the collaborative culture identified in this study reinforces the idea that shared vision and teamwork strengthen institutional capacity (Çoban & Yalçın, 2023; Kaya, 2023). Thematic analysis revealed that leadership initiatives were translated into practice through collective engagement, supporting the view that organizational culture mediates leadership impact.

However, the challenges related to infrastructure limitations and workload imbalance confirm broader findings that structural conditions influence school improvement sustainability (OECD, 2023; Timotheou et al., 2023). In line with qualitative case study principles (Creswell & Poth, 2023), these contextual factors are essential in understanding how leadership practices operate within bounded institutional realities.

In summary, the results and discussion demonstrate that student competitiveness in this madrasah is shaped by the interaction between strategic instructional leadership, professional teacher engagement, and collaborative institutional culture. The qualitative evidence highlights that leadership impact is relational and context-dependent, requiring continuous supervision, shared commitment, and adaptive management to sustain institutional improvement.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined how principal leadership and teacher performance contributed to enhancing student competitiveness at MTs Negeri 1 Empat Lawang. The findings indicate that principal leadership was implemented through strategic planning, instructional supervision, and institutional collaboration. These leadership practices provided direction and structure for academic and extracurricular programs aimed at strengthening student achievement. Teacher performance supported these initiatives through structured lesson planning, competency-based instruction, and active mentoring of students in both academic and non-academic activities.

The interaction between principal leadership and teacher performance created a coordinated institutional environment in which school programs were translated into classroom practices. Student competitiveness was reflected not only in academic outcomes but also in participation in competitions and increased community trust in the madrasah. However, challenges related to infrastructure limitations, workload distribution, and the need for continuous professional development influenced the consistency of program implementation.

These findings suggest that student competitiveness in madrasah settings is strengthened when leadership direction, teacher professionalism, and institutional coordination operate in alignment. Leadership functions as a strategic driver, while teacher performance determines the effectiveness of instructional execution. Sustainable competitiveness therefore depends on continuous collaboration and professional commitment within the school environment.

Based on the findings, several practical suggestions can be proposed. For principals, it is recommended to maintain consistent instructional supervision and strengthen follow-up mechanisms to ensure that leadership strategies are effectively implemented in classroom practices. For teachers, continuous professional development and collaborative planning should be prioritized in order to sustain instructional quality and student achievement. For school management and education authorities, efforts should be directed toward improving infrastructure support and providing structured training programs that enhance leadership and pedagogical competencies. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative or multi-site studies to explore variations in leadership teacher interaction across different madrasah contexts and educational levels.

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