

How Does School Principal Leadership Influence Teacher Performance and Quality of Learning at SMPN 2 Banyuasin III

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Abstrak

Studi ini bertujuan untuk secara empiris menguji pengaruh kepemimpinan kepala sekolah terhadap kinerja guru dan kualitas pembelajaran di SMPN 2 Banyuasin III dalam pelaksanaan Kurikulum Merdeka. Desain Mixed-Methods Penjelasan Berurutan digunakan, dimulai dengan survei kuantitatif terhadap semua guru menggunakan kuesioner skala Likert yang dianalisis melalui Analisis Jalur, diikuti dengan wawancara kualitatif dan analisis dokumen dengan informan kunci untuk memperjelas temuan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan kepala sekolah memiliki pengaruh positif tidak langsung yang signifikan terhadap kualitas pembelajaran melalui kinerja guru sebagai variabel perantara yang krusial. Temuan ini mengonfirmasi bahwa pengaruh kepemimpinan terwujud melalui penguatan praktik pedagogis inti Kurikulum Merdeka, khususnya pembelajaran diferensiasi dan penilaian formatif. Keunikan dari studi ini terletak pada fokusnya pada sekolah berkinerja tinggi (Akreditasi A) yang sedang menjalani reformasi kurikulum dan penggunaan pendekatan campuran yang komprehensif untuk menjelaskan mekanisme pengaruh kepemimpinan. Secara praktis, studi ini memberikan rekomendasi berbasis bukti untuk memperkuat kepemimpinan transformasional dan instruksional guna mendukung implementasi kurikulum yang efektif. Secara teoretis, ini berkontribusi pada literatur manajemen pendidikan dengan memperkuat peran mediasi kinerja guru dalam meningkatkan kualitas pembelajaran selama reformasi kurikulum.

Kata kunci: Pembelajaran Berbasis Masalah, Pasar Modal, Pendidikan Ekonomi, Berpikir Kritis.

Abstract

This study aims to empirically examine the effect of school principal leadership on teacher performance and the quality of learning at SMPN 2 Banyuasin III within the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. A Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods design was employed, beginning with a quantitative survey of all teachers using a Likert-scale questionnaire analyzed through Path Analysis, followed by qualitative interviews and document analysis with key informants to elaborate the findings. The results indicate that school principal leadership has a significant positive indirect effect on learning quality through teacher performance as a crucial mediating variable. The findings confirm that leadership influence is realized through the strengthening of core Merdeka Curriculum pedagogical practices, particularly differentiated learning and formative assessment. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on a high-performing (Accreditation A) school undergoing curriculum reform and the use of a comprehensive mixed-methods approach to explain the mechanisms of leadership influence. Practically, the study provides evidence-based recommendations for strengthening transformational and instructional leadership to support effective curriculum implementation. Theoretically, it contributes to educational management literature by reinforcing the mediating role of teacher performance in improving learning quality during curriculum reform.

Keywords: Principal Leadership, Teacher Performance, Quality of Learning, Merdeka Curriculum, Mediation Analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English is one of the most widely used international languages and functions as a global medium of communication in education, technology, business, and diplomacy (Sari et al., 2023). As a global lingua franca, English plays a strategic role in connecting people across different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In Indonesia, English is taught as a compulsory subject at the secondary and tertiary levels with the primary objective of developing students' communicative competence (Wardani et al., 2024; Rompis et al., 2024). This competence encompasses the four essential language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing which must be supported by adequate mastery of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and discourse structures (Faisal, 2023). Without sufficient linguistic knowledge, students may struggle to comprehend and produce meaningful communication in English.

In addition to the four macro skills, translation is an important component in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts such as Indonesia. Translation serves as a bridge between English and Indonesian, enabling learners to understand texts, interpret meaning accurately, and transfer messages effectively from one language to another (Edelia & Maharsi, 2022). According to Bassnett (2002), translation is the process of transferring meaning from a source language (SL) into an equivalent text in a target language (TL). This process requires not only lexical and grammatical accuracy but also sensitivity to cultural nuances and contextual meaning (Katan, 2014). Therefore, translation competence involves linguistic, semantic, and intercultural understanding.

However, translating English texts into Indonesian remains a challenging task for many Indonesian students, particularly at the junior high school level. Students frequently encounter difficulties in determining contextual meaning, identifying appropriate word choices, understanding idiomatic expressions, and restructuring sentences according to Indonesian grammatical rules. Differences in syntactic patterns between English and Indonesian, such as tense systems, word order, and subject-verb agreement, often lead to literal or inaccurate translations. Furthermore, limited exposure to authentic English texts and insufficient cultural knowledge may hinder students' ability to grasp implied meanings.

Previous studies highlight that vocabulary mastery and grammatical competence significantly influence students' translation performance (O'Neill & Dogan, 2019; Berns & Gurevich, 2017). Learners with restricted lexical resources tend to rely heavily on word-for-word translation strategies, which may result in semantic distortion. Similarly, weak grammatical awareness can cause structural errors and misinterpretation of sentence meaning. These challenges suggest that translation difficulties are closely related to students' linguistic proficiency and cognitive processing skills.

Considering the importance of translation in supporting reading comprehension and overall English achievement, it is essential to identify the specific problems experienced by students and the underlying causes. Understanding these issues can provide valuable insights for teachers in designing more effective instructional strategies to improve translation skills. Therefore, this study aims to investigate (1) the specific translation problems faced by seventh-grade students of SMP Negeri 1 Kayuagung and (2) the main factors contributing to those problems. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of pedagogical

approaches that enhance students' linguistic competence and translation accuracy in EFL classrooms.

2. METHOD

This study applies a Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods design, in which quantitative data are collected and analyzed in the first phase, followed by qualitative data to explain and elaborate the quantitative findings. This design is appropriate when researchers aim to interpret statistical results in greater depth through participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted at SMPN 2 Banyuasin III. Although the study consists of two phases, the primary emphasis is placed on the qualitative phase (QUAL) to provide comprehensive explanations of the statistical relationships identified in the quantitative phase (QUANT).

Phase I: Quantitative (QUANT)

In the first phase, a Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to all teachers (census sampling) to measure their perceptions regarding three main variables: School Principal Leadership, Teacher Performance, and Quality of Learning. The quantitative phase aimed to test a mediation hypothesis, particularly examining whether teacher performance mediates the relationship between principal leadership and learning quality.

The instrument underwent validity and reliability testing prior to analysis. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure internal consistency. Statistical analysis was then conducted to determine direct and indirect effects among variables. The results of this phase provided the foundation for selecting participants and formulating focus areas for the qualitative investigation.

Phase II: Qualitative (QUAL)

The second phase functions to explain how and why the statistical results occurred, especially regarding the role of leadership in supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom/document observations.

Key informants including the school principal, vice principal, and selected core/senior teachers were chosen using purposive sampling based on the research objectives. The selection of teacher participants was guided by quantitative results, particularly those who demonstrated very high and moderate performance scores.

Qualitative data were analyzed using the interactive model of Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis process involved systematic coding to identify emerging themes related to leadership practices, teacher performance, and instructional quality.

To ensure research rigor, triangulation of data sources (interviews, observations, and documentation) was conducted to enhance credibility and confirmability. Finally, the qualitative findings were integrated with the quantitative results to provide a comprehensive

explanation of the mediation model identified in Phase I, thereby strengthening the interpretative validity of the study.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on the quantitative phase (QUANT), the statistical analysis confirmed that the proposed mediation model—School Principal Leadership (X) → Teacher Performance (Y) → Quality of Learning (Z)—demonstrated positive and significant relationships. School Principal Leadership had a significant direct effect on Teacher Performance, while Teacher Performance showed a stronger direct contribution to the Quality of Learning compared to the direct influence of leadership on learning quality. The mediation test indicated that Teacher Performance functioned as a significant mediating variable, partially mediating the relationship between School Principal Leadership and Quality of Learning.

The direct contribution of Teacher Performance to Quality of Learning was substantially higher than the direct effect of School Principal Leadership. This finding statistically supports the assumption that leadership primarily influences instructional quality through improving teachers' professional practices.

The qualitative phase (QUAL) further explained these results. Interviews revealed that the principal of SMPN 2 Banyuasin III implemented leadership practices aligned with transformational and instructional leadership. The principal actively facilitated professional discussions, supervised lesson planning (Modul Ajar), encouraged differentiated instruction, and supported formative assessment practices in line with the Merdeka Curriculum guidelines (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi RI, 2022).

Observations indicated that teachers who reported high leadership support demonstrated stronger classroom engagement strategies, clearer learning objectives, and more adaptive instructional approaches. Documentation analysis of teaching modules and supervision records confirmed consistency between leadership direction and teacher implementation practices.

Discussion

The findings reinforce the theoretical proposition that school leadership influences student learning outcomes indirectly through teacher-related variables. This aligns with the strong claims of successful school leadership proposed by Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris, and David Hopkins (2020), who emphasize that leadership effects on learning are largely mediated by teachers' instructional capacity. Similarly, research by Philip Hallinger and Ronald H. Heck (2016) confirms that leadership impacts student outcomes primarily through its influence on school conditions and teacher performance.

The strong mediating role of Teacher Performance in this study is consistent with Wahyuningsih (2020), who identified teacher performance as a key mediator between principal leadership and student learning outcomes. It also supports Marmoah and Huda (2022), who found that motivational and pedagogical variables act as bridges linking leadership to instructional effectiveness.

From a transformational leadership perspective, the practices observed at SMPN 2 Banyuasin III reflect characteristics described by Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio (2015), including inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The principal's efforts in encouraging teacher innovation and adaptation during the Merdeka Curriculum transition illustrate transformational leadership in practice. Furthermore, Yukl (2019) emphasizes that effective leaders influence organizational outcomes by shaping subordinate attitudes and competencies—an outcome clearly reflected in the improved teacher performance observed in this study.

In terms of instructional leadership, the findings are in line with Hallinger (2018) and Setiawan (2022), who argue that academic supervision and curriculum monitoring significantly enhance instructional quality. The supervision practices related to Modul Ajar development, differentiated learning strategies, and formative assessment correspond to the instructional leadership framework that prioritizes teaching and learning improvement.

The context of the Merdeka Curriculum reform further explains the importance of leadership mediation. According to Pratiwi and Juhji (2023), school principals face complex challenges in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka, requiring adaptive and distributed leadership strategies. The collaborative practices observed in this study resonate with the distributed leadership model described by Fitria and Abdullah (2023) and Harris (2022), where leadership responsibilities are shared to strengthen teacher agency.

Additionally, the emphasis on teacher well-being and supportive leadership aligns with Azizah and Rahmat (2024), who found that supportive leadership reduces burnout and enhances teacher productivity. This supports the argument that leadership effectiveness is not solely technical but also relational and psychological.

However, the relatively small direct effect of School Principal Leadership on Quality of Learning confirms previous findings that leadership rarely produces immediate instructional outcomes without mediating variables (Jaelani, 2023; Mukaromah et al., 2023). This strengthens the justification for using a Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods design, as recommended by Creswell and Clark (2018), to validate statistical mediation and explain contextual dynamics narratively.

Overall, the integration of quantitative mediation testing and qualitative narrative exploration provides robust empirical support that Teacher Performance is the central mechanism translating leadership practices into improved learning quality during the Merdeka Curriculum transition. These findings contribute to addressing the research gap in Indonesian educational management identified by Juliantara (2021), particularly regarding the need for context-sensitive and empirically integrated leadership studies.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Teacher Performance plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between School Principal Leadership and the Quality of Learning, particularly within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation at SMPN 2 Banyuasin III. The quantitative analysis confirmed that while School Principal Leadership directly influences Teacher Performance, it is Teacher Performance that significantly mediates the improvement

in learning quality. This finding emphasizes that effective leadership alone does not directly translate into improved learning outcomes; rather, it is the enhancement of teacher practices, motivated by supportive leadership, that leads to better student performance.

The qualitative phase of the study highlighted the key leadership practices, including transformational leadership and instructional leadership, that supported teachers in adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum. These leadership practices, which focused on creating a supportive environment, providing professional development, and facilitating collaborative teaching strategies, were critical in fostering teacher engagement and improving their instructional practices.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of a comprehensive leadership approach that not only focuses on administrative duties but also on empowering teachers, creating a conducive learning environment, and guiding them through curriculum transitions. Future research should explore the broader impacts of leadership on educational outcomes in diverse contexts, particularly examining how different leadership styles influence various aspects of teacher performance and learning quality.

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