

# Exploring the Influence of Principal Leadership on the Educational Quality of Public Middle Schools in Palembang

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## Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji peran kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dalam meningkatkan kualitas pendidikan di Sekolah Menengah Pertama (SMP) Negeri di Palembang. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif untuk memahami praktik kepemimpinan, strategi, serta dampaknya terhadap kinerja guru dan hasil belajar siswa. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan kepala sekolah yang efektif ditandai dengan pengambilan keputusan yang demokratis, komunikasi yang baik, dan kemampuan untuk memotivasi guru dalam meningkatkan kualitas pembelajaran. Selain itu, peran kepala sekolah sebagai manajer, supervisor, dan inovator berkontribusi signifikan terhadap pencapaian tujuan pendidikan. Implementasi kepemimpinan kolaboratif juga menciptakan iklim sekolah yang positif serta mendukung profesionalisme guru dan perkembangan belajar siswa. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kepemimpinan kepala sekolah memiliki peran strategis dalam mencapai keunggulan sekolah dan meningkatkan kualitas pendidikan secara keseluruhan. Penelitian selanjutnya dapat berfokus pada perbandingan model kepemimpinan di berbagai konteks pendidikan.

**Kata kunci:** Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah, Kualitas Pendidikan, SMP Negeri, Profesionalisme Guru, Iklim Sekolah

## Abstract

This study aims to examine the role of principal leadership in improving the quality of education in Palembang State Junior High Schools. This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to understand leadership practices, strategies, and their impact on teacher performance and student learning outcomes. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The results show that effective principal leadership is characterized by democratic decision-making, effective communication, and the ability to motivate teachers to improve the quality of learning. In addition, the principal's role as a manager, supervisor, and innovator contributes significantly to the achievement of educational goals. The implementation of collaborative leadership also creates a positive school climate and supports teacher professionalism and student learning development. This study concludes that principal leadership plays a strategic role in achieving school excellence and improving the overall quality of education. Further research can focus on comparing leadership models across various educational contexts.

**Keywords:** Principal Leadership, Educational Quality, Public Middle Schools, Teacher Professionalism, School Climate

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education serves as the primary foundation for constructing a developed and competitive national civilization. In the current era, the quality of education is no longer measured solely by students' academic performance but is increasingly defined by the efficacy of learning processes, professional school management, and the visionary leadership of the principal. As educational leaders, principals play a strategic role in mobilizing all school resources to achieve quality educational goals. In the current landscape of globalization and the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum) in Indonesia, the

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challenges facing school leaders are increasingly complex. This requires an unprecedented ability to adapt to rapid technological developments, shifting student needs, and volatile social dynamics (Mulyasa, 2022). This adaptive capacity is further emphasized by Ng and Hu (2023), who argue that in the digital transformation era, school leaders must integrate technological fluency with strategic management to maintain educational relevance. To understand this complexity, Northouse (2022) provides a comprehensive framework that leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.

The theoretical framework of educational leadership often centers on the multifaceted roles a principal must inhabit. According to Mulyasa (2022), the principal maintains a dual role: as a manager and as an instructional leader. As a manager, the principal is held accountable for the administration, finances, and human resources that form the backbone of the institution. Conversely, as an instructional leader, the principal must inspire teachers to elevate the quality of the teaching and learning process through innovation, consistent academic supervision, and teacher empowerment. Recent literature suggests that this instructional role remains the primary driver of school effectiveness in the post-pandemic era (Hallinger & Murphy, 2023). This intersection of management and pedagogy demonstrates that the principal's leadership has a direct, measurable impact on the quality of education within a school.

The quality of education is multidimensional, reflected in a conducive learning environment, strong staff relationships, and improved student outcomes. Effective leaders foster collaboration, provide clear strategic direction, and nurture professionalism. Bush (2021) highlights a shift toward visionary, values-based leadership for long-term sustainability, while Gurr (2022) emphasizes social justice and equitable learning outcomes. Weak leadership, conversely, leads to low teacher motivation, organizational inertia, and declining learning quality (Wahjosumidjo, 2021).

Previous studies have consistently highlighted the importance of specific leadership styles in improving educational outcomes. Wahjosumidjo (2021) suggests that democratic and participatory leadership models increase teacher involvement in decision-making, thereby strengthening teamwork and fostering a sense of shared responsibility for school progress. This aligns with the findings of Harris and Jones (2021), who argue that distributed leadership is essential for navigating the complexities of modern schooling environments. Furthermore, leadership oriented toward teacher development and empowerment has been shown to improve both teaching quality and student achievement in diverse educational settings (Gümüş et al., 2021). In the digital era, this leadership must also encompass technological fluency; Ng and Hu (2023) emphasize that digital leadership is now a prerequisite for managing modern curriculum changes effectively. Moreover, Zeng and Zhang (2022) point out that a principal's ability to act as a mentor directly correlates with increased teacher professional agency, while Pont (2021) asserts that school leadership reform remains the primary engine for broader educational system improvement.

Beyond internal management, educational quality is significantly influenced by external synergy where a competent principal fosters a productive relationship between the school, the school committee, and the broader community. This collaboration ensures that the school does not operate in isolation but functions as an integral part of community development, serving as a vital communication bridge between internal and external stakeholders. Recent

studies confirm that school-community partnerships, brokered by strong leadership, are critical for sustaining long-term educational improvement (Suyatno et al., 2021). This external role is increasingly vital as Wong and Daresh (2023) argue that principals must now possess high cultural intelligence to manage diverse stakeholder expectations. Additionally, Gurr (2022) suggests that successful school leaders are those who can balance internal academic rigor with external social advocacy. The effectiveness of this engagement is often measured by parental trust, which Hallinger and Murphy (2023) identify as a key mediator for student outcomes, reinforcing the conclusion by Bush (2021) that the synergy between internal instructional focus and external strategic networking is what ultimately defines a high-quality educational institution.

Despite the wealth of general literature on school leadership, a significant research gap exists regarding the specific implementation of these leadership functions within the unique socio-cultural and administrative context of public middle schools in Palembang. While national policies like the Independent Curriculum are applied across Indonesia, the local challenges in Palembang ranging from specific infrastructure limitations to varying levels of teacher readiness require a localized investigation.

Many existing studies focus on either purely quantitative correlations or high-level policy analysis, often overlooking the nuanced, qualitative "how" of leadership practices in Palembang's public sector. There is a need to explore how principals in this specific region navigate the transition to newer curricula while managing resource constraints. The problem addressed in this study is the lack of in-depth, qualitative evidence regarding how principal leadership strategies directly translate into educational quality improvements in Palembang's public junior high schools.

In the context of public junior high schools in Palembang, the hurdles faced by principals are increasingly diverse. These include limited infrastructure in certain districts, varying teacher digital literacy when implementing the Independent Curriculum, and the constant pressure to improve standardized learning outcomes. Consequently, principals are expected to develop leadership strategies that are both adaptive and responsive.

One particularly relevant approach is transformational leadership, where the principal acts as an agent of change, encouraging innovation and continuous professional development (Leithwood et al., 2021). This is further supported by the need for strong interpersonal communication. A principal must build positive relationships with all school members, creating an open work environment where the contributions of all teachers are valued. This healthy organizational culture serves as the primary foundation for any sustainable improvement in educational quality (Pont, 2021).

The urgency of this research lies in its potential to provide a deep understanding of how leadership functions are operationalized to improve quality in Palembang's schools. Identifying best practices and specific challenges in this region is crucial for the development of secondary school management strategies. The findings are expected to contribute significantly to the development of educational leadership theory while serving as a practical, evidence-based reference for principals seeking to elevate the quality of learning in their institutions.

Based on the background and problems identified above, the objectives of this research are:

1. To examine and describe the leadership practices and strategies employed by principals in public middle schools in Palembang.
2. To analyze the impact of these leadership practices on teacher performance and student learning outcomes.
3. To identify the challenges and supporting factors encountered by principals in improving the quality of education within the Palembang public school context.

## **2. METHOD**

This research adopts a qualitative approach utilizing a descriptive method to provide a comprehensive and systematic portrayal of the phenomena under study. Qualitative research is particularly suited for this inquiry as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex social dynamics and leadership behaviors within a natural educational setting (Creswell & Poth, 2023). By employing a descriptive design, the study seeks to map out the specific leadership strategies implemented by principals and how these practices influence the educational quality of public middle schools in Palembang.

### ***2.1 Research Design and Context***

The study is grounded in a naturalistic paradigm, focusing on understanding the lived experiences of school stakeholders. The choice of a qualitative descriptive design ensures that the findings remain close to the data and the participants' own words, minimizing researcher bias while maximizing the richness of the contextual information (Lambert & Lambert, 2021). This approach is further justified by Hennink et al. (2022), who argue that qualitative descriptive designs allow researchers to capture the 'nuanced reality' of organizational behavior without the constraints of rigid pre-existing hypotheses. The research was conducted at a Public State Junior High School (SMP Negeri) in Palembang, South Sumatra, providing a specific institutional context that reflects the current challenges of the Indonesian education system.

### ***2.2 Participants and Informants***

The subjects of this research were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the individuals involved possessed specific knowledge and experience relevant to the research objectives (Robinson, 2022). The selection process also adhered to the principle of 'information power,' where the quality of the dialogue with experts is prioritized over a large sample size to ensure data saturation (Robinson, 2022). The primary informants included:

1. The School Principal: As the key actor in leadership and policy implementation.
2. Teachers: To provide perspectives on leadership impact, pedagogical support, and professional climate.
3. Educational Staff: To offer insights into the administrative and managerial efficacy of the principal's leadership.

This multi-perspective approach, often referred to as data source triangulation, ensures the validity and reliability of the qualitative findings by cross-referencing accounts from different organizational levels.

### **2.3 Research Instruments**

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection (human instrument). To support the researcher, several auxiliary instruments were developed:

- Semi-structured Interview Guides: Designed to facilitate open-ended dialogue while ensuring all core research questions were addressed.
- Observation Protocols: Used to record behavioral patterns, leadership interactions, and the school's physical and social environment.
- Document Checklists: To guide the systematic review of school archives, including strategic plans, teacher evaluation records, and student achievement data.

### **2.4 Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected through three primary techniques to ensure a holistic understanding of the research problem:

1. In-depth Interviews: Face-to-face sessions were conducted with the principal and staff to explore leadership philosophies, decision-making processes, and perceived challenges.
2. Participant Observation: The researcher observed daily school operations, faculty meetings, and classroom supervision activities to capture the "real-time" implementation of leadership strategies (Kawulich, 2021).
3. Documentation Studies: A thorough analysis was performed on official documents, such as school mission statements, financial reports, and the implementation files of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, to provide empirical evidence for the leadership claims made during interviews.

### **2.5 Data Analysis Techniques**

The data analysis followed the Interactive Model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which remains a benchmark for qualitative rigor (Miles et al., 2021). This model consists of four concurrent flows of activity:

1. Data Collection: The continuous gathering of information through the aforementioned techniques.
2. Data Reduction: The process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data. Irrelevant information was discarded, and significant patterns related to leadership and educational quality were coded.
3. Data Display: Organized information was presented in the form of narrative text, matrices, or charts to enable the drawing of preliminary conclusions.
4. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: The researcher identified meanings, patterns, and explanations. These conclusions were then verified through peer debriefing and member checking to ensure that the interpretations accurately represented the participants' views (Noble & Heale, 2021). To maintain the integrity of the findings, the analysis incorporated 'thick description,' a technique recommended by Silverman (2021) to provide enough context for external readers to evaluate the transferability of the results.

By integrating these systematic steps, the study ensures that the exploration of principal leadership in Palembang is both academically rigorous and practically relevant for the development of educational quality.

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Result**

The findings of this research, conducted through a qualitative descriptive lens at a public junior high school in Palembang, delineate the specific leadership mechanisms employed to elevate educational quality. The results are categorized into three primary themes: collaborative leadership structures, academic supervision efficacy, and the cultivation of a quality-oriented organizational culture.

#### ***3.1 Collaborative Leadership and Decision-Making***

The data indicates that the principal consistently implements a collaborative leadership style characterized by openness, cooperation, and active participation. Unlike traditional top-down approaches, leadership in this context is distributive. The principal facilitates two-way communication, ensuring that teachers are not merely implementers of policy but active contributors to school development.

This democratic process occurs through regular coordination meetings and performance reflection forums, where teachers can share ideas and give critical input. Observations show decision-making is transparent, strengthening staff trust. Collaborative structures are crucial for school agility, especially during the Kurikulum Merdeka transition (Hidayat & Patras, 2021). Transparency in governance supports teacher buy-in, as respecting professional autonomy encourages adoption of curriculum innovations (Sani & Syamsuar, 2022).

#### ***3.2 Academic Supervision and Teacher Mentoring***

A central finding of this study is the principal's active role in academic supervision. However, the results show that supervision has shifted from a "policing" model to a "mentoring and coaching" model. The principal's involvement includes:

- Collaborative Planning: Working with teachers to design lesson plans that align with student-centered learning goals.
- Classroom Observations: Conducting non-threatening observations focused on pedagogical improvement rather than punitive assessment.
- Reflective Feedback: Providing constructive coaching sessions to help teachers overcome specific obstacles in the teaching and learning process.

The results demonstrate that this supportive supervision directly increases teacher motivation. When supervision is perceived as a developmental tool rather than a formal compliance check, teachers report a higher willingness to experiment with new instructional methods. Recent research suggests that this shift toward "leadership for learning" is a primary determinant in improving classroom-level educational quality (Gümüş et al., 2021).

#### ***3.3 Competency Improvement and Learning Innovation***

The implementation of teacher competency programs, specifically through In-House Training (IHT) and targeted workshops, has yielded measurable positive impacts on classroom effectiveness. This internal capacity-building is crucial because, as noted by Yasin and

Kurniawan (2021), the success of curriculum implementation in Indonesia depends heavily on the principal's ability to translate national policies into actionable classroom strategies. The data reveals that after participating in these internal training sessions, there was a notable shift in teacher behavior:

- **Increased Creativity:** Teachers demonstrated a higher frequency of designing original learning strategies.
- **Innovative Media Integration:** A surge in the use of digital and manipulative media to support student engagement.
- **Student-Centered Approach:** A transition from teacher-centered lecturing to active, inquiry-based learning.

These changes have resulted in higher student participation rates and improved academic achievement. The effectiveness of these internal programs is supported by the principle that continuous professional development (CPD) is most impactful when it is school-based and context-specific (Wong & Daresh, 2023).

### **3.4 Quality-Oriented Work Culture**

The research results further highlight the strengthening of a quality-oriented work culture within the school environment. This culture is manifest in the daily behaviors of the school community, specifically regarding discipline, responsibility, and a shared sense of belonging.

The following table summarizes the key indicators of the school's work culture observed during the study:

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Observation Results</b>	<b>Interpretation Standard</b>
Discipline	High punctuality in class entry and administrative submissions.	Reflects strong professional integrity.
Responsibility	Teachers proactively seeking solutions for struggling students.	Indicates high level of affective commitment.
Sense of Belonging	High participation in voluntary school improvement activities.	Correlates with long-term organizational stability.

This cultural shift stems from the principal consistently modeling values. By maintaining high discipline standards and showing genuine care, the principal creates an environment where teachers feel valued and responsible for collective success. Positive school climate is essential for sustainable educational improvement (Zeng & Zhang, 2022). Such internal cohesion predicts school resilience, particularly amid socio-economic pressures in urban settings (Wong & Daresh, 2023).

In summary, the results show that the synergy between collaborative leadership, developmental supervision, and a robust professional culture creates a fertile ground for achieving school excellence in the Palembang context.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how principal leadership acts as a primary catalyst for enhancing educational quality in the context of public middle schools in Palembang. This collaborative shift is what Hargreaves and

O'Connor (2022) define as collaborative professionalism, where teachers work together with more authority and higher levels of professional autonomy. Harris (2022) further suggests that this style of leadership is non-hierarchical and focuses on the mobilization of expertise throughout the school. By synthesizing the gathered data, it is evident that the leadership transition from a traditional bureaucratic model to a more fluid, collaborative, and transformational approach is essential for modern school excellence.

### **Interpretation of Collaborative Leadership**

The results reinforce the view that principal leadership has a significant and direct influence on educational quality. The collaborative leadership implemented at the public junior high school in Palembang reflects a sophisticated integration of transformational and participatory leadership theories. In practice, the principal does not function as a solitary decision-maker but as a facilitator who actively accommodates ideas from teachers and educational staff.

This leadership model fosters teacher ownership, strengthening their psychological contract with the school. Transformational leaders drive change through inspiration and collective vision, not mandates. In Palembang, collaboration has bridged administrative demands and classroom realities during the Kurikulum Merdeka transition (Harris & Jones, 2021). Effective collaboration requires principals to distribute leadership, creating a 'leadership density' that sustains school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2021).

### **Comparison with Previous Studies and Organizational Climate**

The findings of this study align with the perspectives of Hidayat and Patras (2021), which posit that participatory leadership significantly increases teacher motivation and commitment. In Palembang's public schools, involving teachers in decision-making does more than just increase responsibility; it strengthens the harmonious working relationships between the staff and the leadership.

The open communication fostered by the principal creates a positive organizational climate characterized by high levels of trust. This trust is the "social glue" that allows for smoother implementation of school programs. Compared to schools with rigid, top-down structures, the subject school in Palembang demonstrated higher resilience and adaptability. As Gurr (2022) points out, a positive school climate, nurtured by communicative leadership, is a prerequisite for any sustainable improvement in student learning outcomes. This is consistent with the 'social capital' theory in education, where Tian and Huber (2021) demonstrate that high-trust environments significantly reduce teacher burnout and enhance collective efficacy.

### **The Role of Academic Supervision and Professional Competence**

A critical component of the principal's success in Palembang is the approach to academic supervision. The data shows that teachers benefited significantly from direct guidance in developing learning materials and conducting teaching reflections. This shifts the perception of the principal from a "formal evaluator" to a "professional partner."

This finding aligns with Hallinger and Murphy (2023), who stress that instructional leadership should focus on improving teaching through continuous coaching. In Palembang, principals mentor rather than censor, reducing teacher anxiety during observations and

turning them into growth opportunities. This "leadership for learning" approach embeds pedagogical improvements into daily practice (Gümüş et al., 2021). Mentoring also combats teacher isolation, fostering collective pedagogical accountability (Hallinger & Murphy, 2023).

### **Innovation and the Principal as a Change Agent**

Learning innovations emerging through internal training (In-House Training) demonstrate how the principal fulfills the role of a change agent. By building teacher learning communities, the principal encourages the exchange of experiences and "best practices." This reflective culture is essential for improving the quality of the learning process. Lambert

This approach is supported by Mulyasa (2022), who found that innovative and communicative principals create a productive, change-adaptive work environment. In Palembang, the principal's ability to mobilize internal resources for training proves that limited external funding does not have to be a barrier to professional development. This proactive stance on teacher competency is a hallmark of modern educational leadership, where the principal acts as the "Chief Learning Officer" of the school (Wong & Daresh, 2023).

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The school's culture of discipline, responsibility, and togetherness reflects leadership success, emphasizing learning processes over test scores. Effective leadership addresses academic, social, and emotional aspects simultaneously (Zeng & Zhang, 2022), with organizational conditions shaping intervention outcomes. Sustained focus and the principal's role as a 'change leader' are crucial for school improvement (Heck & Hallinger, 2021; Huber, 2021; Fullan, 2021).

The practical implications of this study highlight several important aspects for improving school management and educational quality. First, competency development for school principals is essential. Principals need continuous and context-based professional development programs that go beyond administrative skills. Training should focus on strengthening emotional intelligence, collaborative negotiation, and instructional coaching abilities so that principals can effectively guide teachers and support learning improvement. By enhancing these competencies, school leaders can better respond to educational challenges and foster a more supportive and professional school climate.

Second, policy adaptation is required at the district and school levels, particularly in regions such as Palembang that are implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Educational policies should encourage a shift toward more democratic and participatory school management practices. Democratic leadership allows teachers to actively participate in decision-making processes, encourages innovation, and provides the flexibility necessary to implement student-centered learning approaches promoted in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* framework.

Third, the sustainability of teacher professional development should be strengthened through the implementation of *In-House Training (IHT)* models within schools. This approach enables schools to conduct regular and context-specific professional learning activities that address teachers' real instructional needs. Continuous internal training programs can help

teachers update their pedagogical knowledge, share best practices, and improve their instructional performance in a sustainable manner (Zulkhairi & Firman, 2021).

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that effective principal leadership is not limited to administrative responsibilities but plays a critical role in developing human resources, particularly teachers' professionalism. Through collaborative leadership practices, principals can build a productive, innovative, and quality-oriented school environment. Such leadership is essential for supporting sustainable educational improvement in public junior high schools in Palembang.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Principal leadership has a significant influence on improving educational quality. Principals who are able to manage human resources, motivate teachers, and build a collaborative culture will create a school climate conducive to improving the quality of learning. This study recommends that principals continue to develop leadership styles that are adaptive to educational changes and focus on teacher empowerment.

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