

The Role of Principal Leadership in Improving the Quality of Education

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the principal's leadership role in improving the quality of education at SMPN 4 Gunung Tuleh, a school located in a remote area with various limitations. This research approach uses ethnographic qualitative methods through in-depth interviews with the principal and several teachers. The results show that the principal's leadership plays an important role in building collaboration with various parties, such as the education office, school committee, teachers and the community. Quality improvement strategies are carried out through strengthening facilities and infrastructure, although limited, as well as learning innovations carried out by teachers. Teacher creativity in overcoming limitations, such as utilizing the surrounding environment as a learning medium and using active methods, is a supporting factor for successful learning. The conclusion from this study is that collaborative, humanist and adaptive leadership has a significant impact on improving the quality of education, even in conditions with limited resources. This study recommends the need for continuous support from various parties to strengthen the role of schools in providing quality education services.

Keywords: Leadership, Principal, Quality, Education

A. Introduction

Educational quality is a crucial indicator in assessing a country's development (Wahyudi et al., 2022). Several Asian countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and China, have demonstrated significant progress in enhancing the quality of education. Singapore possesses a highly structured educational system that emphasizes the development of critical thinking and creativity (Adinda et al., 2024). Malaysia has undertaken various reforms to improve educational standards, including implementing curricula that are more aligned with industry needs (Pratama et al., 2025). China has developed a highly competitive education system, with a strong emphasis on examinations and academic achievement. Through its "Made in China 2025" initiative, the country has made substantial strides in expanding access to and improving the quality of education (Li, 2025).

The quality of education serves as a fundamental pillar in the development of superior and competitive human resources (Farawita, 2024). High-quality education is not solely focused on academic achievement; it also encompasses character development, 21st-century skills, and the cultivation of critical and creative thinking abilities (Naharuddin & Sesmiarni, 2025). In the context of globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, countries with robust educational systems tend to be more adaptive to social, technological, and economic changes (Syerlita & Siagian, 2024).

Therefore, improving the quality of education is an essential prerequisite for national progress, as it empowers individuals to actively contribute to development, reduces social disparities, and fosters a just and civilized society (Barlian et al., 2022). Without a strong commitment to educational quality, efforts toward national development are likely to be unbalanced and unsustainable.

In the pursuit of improving educational quality, the principal's leadership plays a highly strategic role. The principal serves not only as an administrative manager but also as a transformational leader capable of articulating a clear vision, cultivating a positive school culture, and mobilizing all components of the school community to achieve more effective educational goals (Ismunandar, 2025). The leadership of the school principal plays a pivotal role in initiating transformative changes aimed at improving the quality of education by enhancing student management through the enforcement of stricter discipline and the implementation of innovative programs (A. J. D. R. Sari et al., 2021).

The success of such changes largely depends on the principal's leadership, particularly through their roles as a decision-maker, driving force, philosophical guide, and collaborative partner. As a leader, the principal must be able to encourage collaboration among teachers, administrative staff, students, parents, and all school stakeholders in order to achieve the school's goals efficiently and effectively. High quality education requires professional educational personnel (Amon et al., 2021). Educational quality can be attained when various components such as inputs, processes, teachers, infrastructure, and funding meet specific standards. Among these components, professional human resources play the most critical role. Qualified personnel are those capable of responding to challenges swiftly and responsibly (Fitri et al., 2023).

However, Indonesia continues to face significant challenges in improving the quality of education. This indicates a pressing need for the country to enhance its educational standards in order to achieve the goals of sustainable development (Anugrah et al., 2022). Key issues affecting the quality of education in Indonesia include an insufficient number of qualified teachers, limited technological literacy particularly in remote areas and inadequate budget allocations (Musdalipah, 2024). Previous research has shown that

effective school principals can enhance both teacher and student motivation and contribute to the development of relevant curricula (Muzaini et al., 2023). Similarly, findings by Artanti et al (2024) reveal that the principal's role in managerial functions and instructional supervision is positively correlated with educational quality. Nonetheless, many of these studies tend to focus primarily on general descriptions of the principal's role or are limited to administrative and managerial dimensions. This raises a critical question: how does school leadership contribute to improving educational quality? The aim of this study is to explore in greater depth the role of school principals in enhancing the quality of education.

B. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the underlying dynamics behind a phenomenon that remains relatively unexplored. Ethnography is utilized to provide a detailed and contextual description of established patterns of behavior and thought within the studied group, which are then documented through written narratives, photographs, illustrations, or video recordings (Sari et al., 2023). As an in-depth study of naturally occurring behaviors within a specific culture or social group, ethnographic methods enable the researcher to explore how a school principal enhances the quality of education at a junior high school in West Pasaman.

The research seeks to uncover the strategies and leadership styles employed by the principal to improve educational quality. The resulting narrative is expected to offer a comprehensive portrayal of instructional leadership roles, the challenges encountered, and effective strategies that may serve as models or references for other schools aiming to improve educational outcomes. The narrative

approach adopted in this study allows for a deeper understanding of the social, professional, and strategic contexts in which school leadership operates, thereby helping to identify critical factors that influence the quality of education.

This study was conducted at a public junior high school (SMP) in West Pasaman. The school was selected as the research site due to its distinctive characteristics as an educational institution that integrates religious values into both its curriculum and instructional practices, making it a compelling subject for evaluating the effectiveness of learning approaches. Moreover, the school is believed to adopt a leadership style that may be participatory or grounded in religious principles. It also serves as a representative case for exploring the implementation of effective instructional strategies, particularly in relation to character education and academic achievement.

The study aims to offer practical recommendations for school development, especially in terms of improving instructional quality and leadership effectiveness. Additional practical considerations, such as accessibility and established relationships with the school community, also contributed to the selection of this institution as the research site. Therefore, this school is deemed an appropriate and strategic choice to support the objectives of the study.

In the process of recruiting research participants, the researcher's status as an alumnus of the school and existing familial ties with members of the school community including the principal played a facilitating role. These established relationships, particularly with the school principal, enabled the researcher to approach potential participants directly and present the research topic in a relevant and contextually appropriate manner. The researcher clearly and thoroughly explained the purpose and significance of the study before requesting consent to participate. The principal, teachers, and

students were involved in this study.

Participant recruitment began with ensuring the willingness of potential informants to be interviewed and to share information related to the research topic and focus. The researcher adhered to ethical principles, including maintaining data confidentiality and obtaining informed and voluntary consent from all participants. The number of participants was adjusted according to the scope of the study for example, one principal and two to four teachers. The researcher also provided an official letter of research approval from the university to the school. Upon receiving institutional approval, the researcher proceeded with participant selection.

The school principal was recruited by virtue of their position, while teachers were recruited directly by the researcher based on their availability, as prior acquaintance already existed between the researcher and participants. Students who agreed to participate were invited to voluntarily complete a consent form. The researcher then scheduled interviews with the selected informants. Prior to each interview session, the researcher initiated casual conversation to ease any tension and create a more comfortable atmosphere for participants. Data table of principal and teacher participants at one of the schools in West Pasaman.

Table 1. Table of participant data for principals and teachers

Participant Types	Gender	age	Last education	Length of service
Headmaster (WN)	Woman	42	Bachelor	3 Years
Teacher 1(AR)	Man	47	Bachelor	15 Years
Teacher 2(KY)	Woman	46	Bachelor	15 years
Teacher 3(RN)	Man	40	Bachelor	15 years

Data collection in this study was conducted through observation, interviews, and document analysis. During the observation phase, the researcher observed the principal's activities at school,

beginning 20 minutes before the school day commenced and continuing until the end of the school day. The observations were conducted intensively over a two-week period in February. The focus of the observation was on the principal's leadership style, school management abilities, and communication with both teachers and students. The researcher recorded the principal's activities and participated in various events attended by the principal, including staff meetings.

In addition to observing the principal, the researcher also observed teachers and students. This included monitoring teaching methods, teacher-student communication, and other practices related to educational quality. The researcher also paid attention to students' motivation and learning interest within the school environment. Observational data were systematically recorded using observation sheets prepared for this purpose. For the interviews, the researcher posed a series of questions to each participant regarding the role of the principal in improving educational quality at the school. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher developed an interview guide. A semi-structured interview approach was employed to allow for flexibility while maintaining a clear focus on the research objectives.

Before starting the interview sessions, the researcher sought the participants' consent to record the conversations. Interviews were conducted over 20–40 minutes using a digital audio recorder, in this case, a mobile phone. To maintain participant confidentiality, pseudonyms or initials were used in all recorded and transcribed data. The principal was interviewed approximately two to three times per week, each session lasting 20–40 minutes. Over the course of a month, the researcher conducted between four and eight interview sessions with the principal during regular school hours. For subject teachers, the researcher made appropriate adjustments to ensure a comfortable and non-intimidating interview setting.

Between two and four teachers were involved in the interviews, with each agreeing to allocate time for the process. The researcher approached teachers in a calm and informal manner to ensure the interviews were relaxed and conducive to open dialogue. Formal agreements were made with each teacher to schedule the interviews, which generally lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. These sessions were also recorded using a mobile phone, and consent was formally requested prior to each recording to ensure adherence to research ethics and to respect the rights and privacy of participants.

Documentation was conducted to strengthen the information obtained from interviews and observations. This process aimed to provide a concrete overview of the principal's role in improving the quality of education. The researcher collected various documents related to efforts to enhance educational quality. These documents included materials such as the school's profile photos, the principal's activity program documents, school evaluation and supervision reports, school progress reports, leadership vision and mission statements, and other relevant documents.

The data analysis process involves the systematic organization and arrangement of data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. The steps include categorizing data, breaking it down into smaller units, synthesizing information, identifying patterns, selecting relevant data for study, and drawing conclusions to facilitate easier understanding. All collected data will be thoroughly analyzed. For observational data, the researcher collects information from direct observation, in-depth interviews, and document reviews. After data collection, data reduction is performed by selecting, simplifying, and transforming raw field data. Subsequently, the researcher presents the reduced or categorized data and draws conclusions by summarizing the essential parts of the study in clear and accessible language.

In analyzing interview data, a systematic approach is employed to ensure the validity and meaningfulness of the findings. First, the researcher transcribes audio recordings by repeatedly listening to the interview sessions. Next, irrelevant words are removed from the transcripts without altering their meanings.

The transcripts are then thoroughly read to understand the content, and key sections related to the research questions are highlighted. The researcher holds meetings to discuss possible interpretations of the data and alternative explanations that could clarify the findings. Additionally, during each meeting, data triangulation is conducted by comparing interview data with other sources such as field notes and curriculum documents to enhance the validity of the analysis and broaden the researcher's understanding of the data's meaning.

For document analysis, the researcher begins by collecting all relevant documents. Once gathered, the data is processed to simplify and organize it systematically. The researcher categorizes the data, arranges and quantifies it, and presents the findings in tabular form. Finally, the researcher analyzes and processes the data and draws conclusions based on the obtained information.

C. Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis of interviews with the principal and teachers, supported by field observations and documentation, this study explores the role of school leadership in improving the quality of education at SMPN 4 Gunung Tuleh. From the research findings, three main themes emerged: (a) collaborative leadership, (b) improvement of facilities and infrastructure, and (c) enhancement of educational quality. Each of these findings is discussed in detail as follows:

Collaborative leadership

Collaborative leadership is an effective form of leadership in managing change, which requires collaboration, active listening, influence, and adaptation (Kasmawati, 2021). Based on the interview with the principal, it was found that the principal employs a collaborative leadership strategy. The importance of collaboration is emphasized as a strategic approach in educational leadership. The principal stressed that a school cannot function effectively if it relies on only one party. For example, the principal stated: Collaboration means working together. The school is overseen by the education department, and in the community, there is a committee. So if we work individually, it will not work (Principal, Interview: April 11, 2025).

This statement highlights that cooperation is the key to the successful implementation of school programs. The principal acknowledges that the educational structure involves various stakeholders, such as the education department, school committee, teachers, educational staff, and parents. Therefore, coordination among these parties becomes the foundation for achieving better educational goals (Sihombing & Samosir, 2021).

Furthermore, teachers also provided positive assessments of the principal's leadership, noting how it fosters harmonious collaboration. One teacher expressed: The collaboration with the teachers at the school is very solid because our current principal is also a former teacher at SMPN 4 Gunung Tuleh. This has fostered a very friendly relationship in terms of administration management, learning management, and the approach and communication with other teachers, as well as with our students (Teacher, A: April 17, 2025).

The principal not only performs supervisory functions but also provides emotional and professional support during the learning process. This approach reflects a humanistic leadership style that

fosters a sense of security, appreciation, and motivation among teachers. As expressed by one of the teachers: During classroom supervision, the principal is able to guide us, the teachers' council, to carry out our duties effectively (Teacher K, April 15, 2025).

Improving the quality of education

Quality is the ultimate goal of a product in meeting established standards. School services can be considered of good quality when they are designed to be simple yet essential and meet the required standards (Marpaung et al., 2023). According to Surya, educational quality refers to the overall level of educational processes and outcomes determined according to specific approaches and criteria (Fitrah, 2017).

The interview results indicate that the principal's strategy for improving educational quality involves two approaches: strengthening facilities and infrastructure, and educational innovation. The principal acknowledges that adequate educational facilities are a fundamental foundation for creating quality learning experiences. In the interview, the principal stated: One of the efforts to improve the quality of education is by completing the facilities and infrastructure, such as the laboratory room and library—although the books are still limited—and striving as much as possible to make students feel more comfortable in learning". (Principal, Interview: April 11, 2025).

The principal's statement demonstrates a strong awareness of the importance of a supportive learning environment. Despite existing limitations, the principal strives to provide at least the minimum facilities that can enhance student comfort and the quality of learning.

Beyond managerial aspects, teachers also play a crucial role in

improving educational quality (Susanti et al., 2023). Teachers implement various active and innovative teaching strategies to increase student motivation and understanding, as expressed by one of the teachers:

“I strive to engage students actively in every part of the material delivered. The content is repeatedly orally reinforced during the lesson so that what they express is retained in their memory throughout the learning process, meaning to keep students actively involved.” (Teacher A: April 17, 2025).

The above statement reflects the implementation of an active learning strategy using verbal interaction techniques to strengthen students' memory. This strategy has proven effective in Islamic religious education, which is conceptual and memorization-based (Majid, 2024). Another teacher added a different approach by stating:

“One way that I can use to improve the quality of education here is by motivating students to study harder, learning through diverse teaching methods, using engaging learning media, showing educational videos, and other activities.” (Teacher K: April 15, 2025)

The application of varied media and methods creates an enjoyable learning experience while stimulating students' interest in the subject matter. The third teacher also emphasized the importance of a personal approach and creating a learning environment that does not pressure students, stating:

“For the children, I usually approach them personally. I talk to them, encourage them, and sometimes share inspirational stories, especially from the sports world that they like. I also make the learning atmosphere enjoyable and active, so they feel that lessons are not a burden but something to be enjoyed.” (Teacher R: April 22, 2025)

This strategy represents a tangible effort focusing on students' feelings and comfort in receiving the material. Despite limited facilities, the teachers demonstrate high dedication and strive to foster students' enthusiasm for learning. All informants acknowledge that the quality of education at the school is still developing; however, the limitations of facilities are not considered the main obstacle. Both teachers and the principal show commitment to continuously innovate and adapt according to the circumstances.

Improvement of facilities and infrastructure

Educational facilities refer to all amenities that directly support the educational process, particularly the teaching and learning activities, whether movable or immovable, to ensure that the achievement of educational goals runs smoothly, orderly, effectively, and efficiently (Suranto et al., 2022). Meanwhile, infrastructure refers to facilities that do not directly support the educational or teaching process (Sopian, 2019).

The interview results also indicate tangible changes and efforts made by the principal and teachers to improve the quality of education amidst existing limitations. This study found that the first effort involves the gradual development of facilities through collaboration. The principal explained that the construction of several key facilities was carried out through initiatives from the community and the school committee, such as the construction of the prayer room (musholla). The principal stated:

"The prayer room (musala) was built in 2022 using community self-help funds. The community committee collected and raised funds through their own efforts and initiatives. This was then followed by a proposal submitted to the Education Office, which resulted in a grant

of 120 million rupiah that was used to complete the construction recently. The laboratory room was established in 2017, but the equipment was still quite limited". (Principal, Interview: April 11, 2025).

This indicates that the school does not rely solely on official budgets but also actively involves community participation. In addition to the prayer room, the laboratory has also been established since 2017, albeit with limited equipment. Secondly, there is a technological limitation in the implementation of the independent curriculum. Teachers face significant challenges related to technology, as expressed by one teacher:

"The weakness lies in the lack of adequate internet connection for the teaching and learning process, which greatly affects the quality of education compared to previous years. However, thankfully, we now have a projector (infocus), which teachers sometimes use as a learning media. Regarding classroom facilities, the principal is currently working on providing one fan per classroom" (Teacher A, April 17, 2025).

Nevertheless, efforts continue to be made, such as procuring projectors and installing fans in each classroom, initiatives currently being pursued by the principal. Thirdly, regarding the improvement of facilities and infrastructure, the second teacher acknowledged that the overall quality of education is still low but demonstrated tangible progress. The teacher stated:

"The quality of education in our junior high school has always fluctuated, but even though it is considered low, our principal and teachers always strive to do their best. In the past, the facilities and infrastructure were very inadequate, with many deficiencies. However, gradually, improvements have been made, such as the establishment of a prayer room and a library, although the number of books is still

limited. Alhamdulillah, these facilities are now available” (Teacher K, April 15, 2025).

This condition indicates that the physical development of the school is a gradual process that requires perseverance and collective commitment. The fourth finding highlights the creativity of teachers in overcoming limitations. Despite the scarcity of teaching aids and sports facilities, the learning process is not hindered. For instance, the physical education teacher utilizes the surrounding environment and independently creates teaching tools. As one teacher stated:

“I encourage students to make use of the surrounding environment for practice, such as open fields or the schoolyard. We also sometimes create our own teaching aids using simple materials. Occasionally, sports equipment is damaged or insufficient for all students. But as I mentioned earlier, we creatively find solutions” (Teacher R, April 22, 2025).

This practice reflects a tangible form of education based on local wisdom and the creative use of available resources.

D. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher concludes that the leadership of the principal at SMPN 4 Gunung Tuleh plays a crucial role in improving the quality of education despite existing limitations. Collaborative leadership serves as a strategic approach in the implementation of school programs and the development of facilities. The enhancement of infrastructure is carried out gradually through community self-help initiatives and support from the education office. Teachers innovate their teaching methods to adapt the learning process to the actual conditions of the students and the available facilities. The creativity of teachers in overcoming limitations demonstrates a collective commitment to maintaining

the quality of learning. Through a leadership style that is collaborative, humanistic, and responsive, the principal has succeeded in fostering a positive work environment and gradually enhancing educational quality. Although challenges remain, the enthusiasm and dedication of all school stakeholders are the key factors driving educational transformation at SMPN 4 Gunung Tuleh.

Based on the research findings, the researcher offers several recommendations as follows: For school principals: It is expected that they continue to maintain and enhance the collaborative leadership style that has been implemented, while also expanding networks of cooperation with external parties such as non-governmental organizations, the business sector, and alumni in order to support broader efforts to improve the quality of education.

For teachers: It is advised that teachers continue to develop innovative teaching methods, utilize available media and technology, and strengthen personal and motivational approaches to students, especially in overcoming limitations of facilities. For local government and education offices: It is hoped that they can provide more proportional and equitable budget support, particularly for schools in remote areas, to improve the still limited educational infrastructure and facilities. For future researchers: This study can serve as a reference for further research with a broader scope and more varied methods, such as qualitative approaches or comparative studies between schools in regions with similar conditions.

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