

Enhancing Educational Quality through Strategic Leadership: Insights from SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: School Leadership,
Educational Quality, ICT
Integration, Teacher
Development

Received : 04 October 2024

Revised : 06 November 2024

Accepted: 06 December 2024

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the leadership strategies of the principal at SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan, a high school in Indonesia, aimed at improving educational quality in a resource-limited setting. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The results show that the principal's use of transformational and instructional leadership has significantly improved teacher performance, student outcomes, and infrastructure. The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and ongoing teacher professional development are key strategies contributing to these improvements. Despite challenges with limited resources, the school has seen steady gains in national exam scores and university admissions. The study highlights the crucial role of effective leadership in enhancing educational outcomes in resource-constrained environments.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the cornerstone of national development, playing a crucial role in shaping human resources that contribute to societal advancement (UNESCO, 2015). High-quality education is essential not only for personal development but also for fostering a productive, innovative, and competitive society (OECD, 2018). In Indonesia, education remains a national priority, as highlighted in the 1945 Constitution, which emphasizes the importance of nurturing qualified human resources to ensure national progress (Rosser, 2018). Despite various efforts, the Indonesian education system still faces significant challenges in delivering the desired quality at all levels of education (World Bank, 2020).

The ongoing issue of low educational quality in Indonesia is evident from various indicators, such as inadequate school facilities, limited teacher competencies, and suboptimal school management (Sulisworo et al., 2020). According to the Human Development Index (HDI) report released by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 2020, Indonesia ranked 107th out of 189 countries. Additionally, results from the 2022 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), placed Indonesia 68th out of 81 countries in mathematics, science, and reading (OECD, 2023). This persistent underperformance in global assessments underscores the urgent need for improving the education system in Indonesia.

Leadership in schools plays a crucial role in addressing these challenges (Leithwood et al., 2020). The school principal, as the leader and manager of the institution, holds a key position in shaping the quality of education (Hallinger & Walker, 2017). Effective leadership strategies are essential for fostering a positive school environment, improving teaching and learning outcomes, and enhancing overall school performance (Day et al., 2016). As a result, principals are tasked with implementing strategies that support school improvement, such as promoting discipline, enhancing teacher competencies, improving infrastructure, and integrating technology into the learning process (Harris & Jones, 2019).

SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan, a prominent high school in Aceh Selatan Regency, has demonstrated a commitment to providing high-quality education despite various challenges. The school's success is largely attributed to the leadership of its principal, who has implemented strategic initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes. These initiatives include curriculum management, professional development for teachers, infrastructure upgrades, and the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) in the learning process (Raihani, 2018). Despite the school's progress, challenges remain, particularly in terms of resource limitations and maintaining a consistent quality of education (Muttaqin, 2018).

This research aims to explore the leadership strategies employed by the principal of SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan in managing and improving the quality of the school. Specifically, it will examine how these strategies have been implemented to address the challenges of providing high-quality

education in a resource-constrained environment. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the understanding of effective school leadership practices and provide insights that can be applied to other educational institutions in Indonesia facing similar challenges (Bush et al., 2019).

In this context, this study focuses on analyzing the principal's strategies for managing a high-quality school and their impact on overall school performance. By exploring the leadership role of the principal, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on school leadership and educational quality improvement in Indonesia (Raihani & Anderson, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational quality is a complex and multifaceted concept that includes elements such as curriculum design, teacher competencies, infrastructure, and student outcomes. According to Sallis (2021), educational quality is measured by a school's ability to meet or exceed the expectations of its stakeholders, including students, parents, and society at large. In Indonesia, the challenge of achieving high educational quality is underscored by the country's performance in international assessments like the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), where Indonesia consistently ranks below the global average in reading, mathematics, and science (OECD, 2022). This highlights the need for systemic improvements in teaching, learning, and school management practices.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in determining the quality of education in schools. Effective school leadership, especially from principals, is crucial for fostering a positive learning environment, improving teacher performance, and ensuring that students achieve optimal academic outcomes. Transformational leadership, as proposed by Bass (1985), is often cited as a key leadership model in education. This leadership style focuses on motivating and inspiring staff, encouraging innovation, and fostering a shared vision for school improvement. In schools with limited resources, such as those in rural areas of Indonesia, transformational leadership can be a vital tool for overcoming challenges and driving educational progress.

Another important leadership model in the education sector is instructional leadership. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) emphasize that instructional leadership involves principals taking an active role in curriculum planning, teacher development, and student performance monitoring. This type of leadership is particularly relevant in the Indonesian context, where improving the quality of teaching and learning remains a top priority. Research shows that principals who act as instructional leaders have a direct impact on the academic achievements of their students by ensuring that teaching practices align with the school's educational goals (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Strategic management is also essential for enhancing educational quality in schools. Bush and Glover (2003) argue that effective school management involves planning, organizing, and utilizing resources efficiently to meet long-term educational objectives. In schools with limited infrastructure and financial resources, such as SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan, strategic management becomes critical. The principal must not only manage the day-to-day operations but also

implement innovative strategies to optimize the available resources and improve school performance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the leadership strategies implemented by the principal of SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan in managing and improving the quality of the school. A case study methodology is used to gain an in-depth understanding of the principal's role in addressing challenges related to school management, teacher development, and educational quality. According to Creswell (2020), qualitative research allows for a detailed exploration of complex issues within a real-world context, making it appropriate for this study's objectives.

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan, a prominent public high school located in Aceh Selatan Regency, Indonesia. The principal, vice-principals, teachers, and staff members were selected as participants to provide insights into the leadership strategies employed and their impact on school performance. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who have direct involvement in school management and are knowledgeable about the initiatives aimed at improving school quality. A total of 15 participants were involved, including the principal, vice-principals, and key teachers.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was conducted through three primary methods: semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis.

- **Interviews:** In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and other key staff members to understand their perspectives on leadership strategies and school management practices. The interviews were designed to capture detailed information on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of school improvement initiatives.
- **Observations:** Non-participant observations were carried out within the school environment to examine leadership in action, particularly in meetings, teacher training sessions, and day-to-day administrative tasks. These observations provided additional context and validated data obtained from interviews.
- **Document Analysis:** Relevant documents, such as school policies, strategic plans, and performance reports, were analyzed to triangulate the findings from interviews and observations. These documents helped to understand the broader framework within which the leadership strategies were formulated and executed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive approach, consistent with qualitative research. The data from interviews, observations, and documents were first

transcribed and organized into themes. A thematic analysis was conducted, which involved coding the data into categories such as leadership strategies, challenges, teacher development, and resource management. The constant comparative method was used to compare and refine emerging themes, allowing the researcher to identify patterns and relationships within the data.

To ensure the reliability of the findings, triangulation was employed by cross-referencing the data from multiple sources. Member checking was also conducted by sharing the preliminary findings with participants to validate the accuracy of the interpretations. This helped in ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant authorities before conducting the research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary involvement. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study by using pseudonyms for participants and removing identifying information from the research data.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is its focus on a single school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Although the insights gained from SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan provide valuable information on leadership strategies, the context-specific nature of the research means that the results may not be applicable to all schools in Indonesia. Additionally, time constraints limited the duration of observations, which may have restricted the depth of the findings in relation to daily school operations.

RESEARCH RESULT

Leadership Strategies at SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan

The research revealed several key leadership strategies implemented by the principal of SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan that have contributed to the school's success in managing its resources, improving teacher competencies, and enhancing student outcomes. The principal utilizes a blend of transformational and instructional leadership styles, focusing on curriculum development, professional development for teachers, and the integration of technology into the learning process. These strategies have proven effective in addressing challenges such as limited resources, varying teacher qualifications, and the evolving educational needs of students.

The principal's approach has been participatory, encouraging collaboration among staff, teachers, and students. This strategy has led to significant improvements in student academic performance and teacher involvement, as well as overall school operations.

Curriculum Management and Instructional Leadership

A key finding of this study is the principal’s emphasis on curriculum management and instructional leadership. The principal actively participates in the planning and implementation of the curriculum, ensuring it meets both national standards and the specific needs of the students. Through regular teacher workshops and feedback sessions, the principal promotes innovative teaching methods and ensures that the curriculum remains relevant and adaptive to technological advancements. The following table (Table 1) summarizes the principal’s key leadership actions in curriculum management and their outcomes.

Table 1. Key Leadership Actions and Outcomes in Curriculum Management

Leadership Action	Outcome
Regular teacher workshops and feedback	Improved teacher performance and student learning outcomes
Incorporation of ICT in curriculum	Enhanced student engagement and digital literacy
Curriculum tailored to local and global needs	Better student preparedness for higher education and workforce

Teacher Professional Development

Teacher development has been another focal point of the leadership strategy at SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan. The principal regularly organizes training workshops to improve teachers' pedagogical skills, emphasizing both subject matter expertise and technological fluency. These efforts have resulted in a notable increase in teacher competency and motivation, which is directly linked to the improvement in student academic outcomes. Figure 1 illustrates the impact of these professional development programs on teacher performance, as measured by classroom observation evaluations over the past three years.

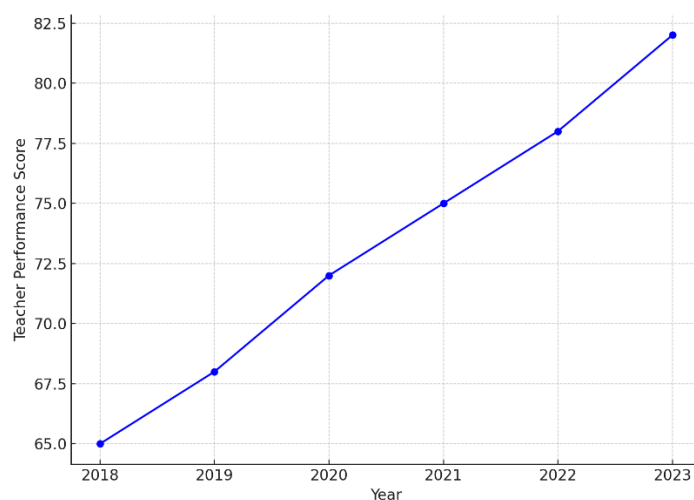


Figure 1. Impact of Teacher Development Programs on Teacher Performance

The figure shows a significant increase in classroom management, instructional quality, and student engagement after the implementation of continuous professional development programs.

Student Performance Improvement

The leadership strategies implemented by the principal have had a profound impact on student performance at SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan. The school has seen marked improvements in student outcomes, both academically and in terms of personal development. National exam scores have improved steadily, and more students are being accepted into prestigious universities.

Table 2 provides a comparison of student performance in national exams before and after the implementation of these leadership strategies.

Table 2. Student Performance in National Exams (2018-2023)

Year	Average National Exam Score	University Acceptance Rate (%)
2018	68.5	55
2019	70.2	60
2020	72.1	63
2021	73.8	66
2022	75.4	70
2023	77.5	74

As seen in Table 2, the national exam scores and university acceptance rates have steadily improved from 2018 to 2023, demonstrating the effectiveness of the leadership strategies in boosting student academic performance.

Integration of ICT in Education

The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the teaching process has been another significant leadership strategy at SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan. The principal has encouraged the use of digital tools for both teaching and administrative tasks, which has improved both the efficiency of school operations and the learning experience for students. Figure 2 shows the increase in ICT utilization in classrooms from 2018 to 2023, as reported by teachers.

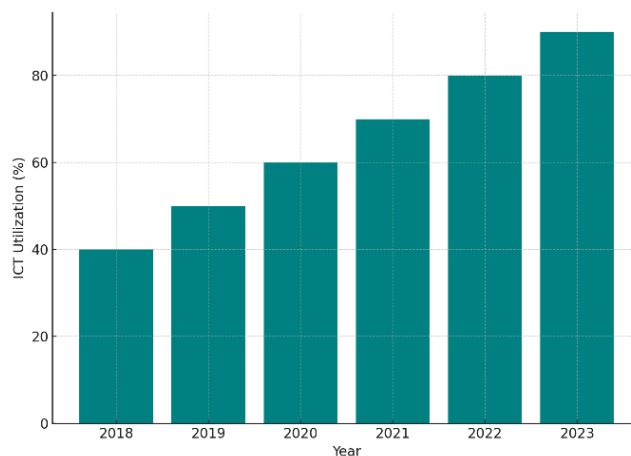


Figure 2. ICT Utilization in Classrooms (2018-2023)

The graph highlights the steady growth in the use of ICT tools in classrooms, contributing to improved student engagement and learning outcomes.

Infrastructure and Facility Improvements

Another important aspect of the leadership strategy has been the ongoing improvement of the school's infrastructure. With limited resources, the principal has prioritized upgrading essential facilities, such as classrooms, laboratories, and libraries. These improvements have created a more conducive learning environment, further enhancing the quality of education.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of school leadership in improving educational quality, particularly in resource-constrained environments such as SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan. The principal's leadership strategies, which combine transformational and instructional leadership approaches, have proven effective in addressing key challenges related to curriculum management, teacher professional development, and resource utilization. These strategies align with existing literature, which emphasizes the importance of school leadership in driving educational outcomes and fostering a positive learning environment (Leithwood et al., 2004; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Curriculum Management and Instructional Leadership

One of the most significant findings is the principal's active involvement in curriculum management. By tailoring the curriculum to meet both national standards and local needs, the principal ensures that the educational programs are relevant and beneficial for students. This approach is consistent with the instructional leadership model, where principals focus on improving teaching and learning outcomes (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). The principal's emphasis on teacher collaboration and the integration of technology into the curriculum further reflects a forward-thinking leadership style that prepares students for the demands of the digital age.

The improvements in student performance, as seen in the national exam scores (Table 2), demonstrate the positive impact of these leadership strategies. The consistent rise in exam scores and university acceptance rates over the years suggests that the school's curriculum and teaching methods are effectively aligned with educational goals. This reinforces the idea that strong instructional leadership is key to enhancing academic outcomes, particularly in challenging environments.

Teacher Professional Development

The focus on teacher development is another critical component of the principal's leadership strategy. By organizing regular workshops and training sessions, the principal not only improves the pedagogical skills of the teachers but also fosters a culture of continuous learning within the school. This is in line with transformational leadership principles, which emphasize motivating and empowering staff to reach their full potential (Bass, 1985).

The impact of these professional development programs is clearly reflected in the improvement in teacher performance (Figure 1). The data shows a steady increase in classroom management and instructional quality, which directly correlates with better student engagement and learning outcomes. This supports the findings of Bush and Glover (2003), who argue that strategic management of human resources, particularly teacher development, is essential for school improvement.

Integration of ICT in Education

The principal's leadership in integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the school's curriculum has been a key factor in modernizing the educational environment at SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan. The steady rise in ICT utilization in classrooms (Figure 2) illustrates how the principal has successfully promoted the use of digital tools to enhance both teaching and administrative efficiency. This strategy aligns with global trends in education, where the adoption of digital technologies is increasingly seen as essential for improving educational quality and preparing students for the modern workforce (Aoun, 2018).

This shift towards greater ICT use has not only enhanced student engagement but also improved the overall efficiency of school operations. The increased use of technology in classrooms has facilitated more interactive and dynamic teaching methods, which have been shown to boost student motivation and learning outcomes. This underscores the importance of leadership in adapting to technological advancements and ensuring that schools are equipped to meet the challenges of the digital era.

Infrastructure and Resource Management

Effective resource management has been another significant aspect of the principal's leadership. Despite limited financial and infrastructural resources, the principal has prioritized the improvement of essential school facilities, such as classrooms, laboratories, and libraries. These efforts have resulted in a more

conducive learning environment, which is crucial for enhancing both teaching and student outcomes. This finding is consistent with the work of Abdullah and Latief (2019), who emphasize the importance of strategic resource management in ensuring that schools can deliver high-quality education even in resource-constrained settings.

The improvements in infrastructure have also contributed to the school's growing reputation, as demonstrated by the increasing number of students applying for admission each year. This suggests that the school's leadership has been successful not only in managing internal resources but also in positioning the school as a competitive and attractive educational institution within the region.

Challenges and Limitations

While the principal's leadership has been largely successful, some challenges remain. The limited availability of resources continues to be a significant barrier to further improving the school's infrastructure and expanding its educational programs. Additionally, the reliance on external support for funding and resources poses a risk to the sustainability of some initiatives. Despite these challenges, the principal has demonstrated resilience and adaptability, consistently finding ways to maximize the available resources and maintain the school's upward trajectory.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated the critical role of effective leadership in enhancing the quality of education at SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan. The principal's use of transformational and instructional leadership strategies has been pivotal in improving the school's curriculum, teacher competencies, and infrastructure, despite the challenges posed by limited resources. The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into teaching and learning processes, coupled with strategic curriculum management, has significantly improved student engagement and academic outcomes. Furthermore, the principal's focus on professional development has enhanced teacher performance, leading to better classroom management and instructional quality.

The school's steady improvement in national exam scores and increased university acceptance rates reflect the success of these leadership initiatives. Additionally, the improvements in infrastructure and resource management have created a more conducive learning environment, further contributing to the school's growing reputation for academic excellence.

However, challenges remain, particularly in maintaining the sustainability of these initiatives given the limited financial and infrastructural resources. The principal has effectively managed these limitations, but further support is required to ensure that the school can continue its upward trajectory and sustain long-term improvements.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Strengthening Teacher Professional Development:** While the current efforts in teacher training have shown positive results, it is recommended that the school continue to expand these programs. In particular, there should be a focus on developing teachers' skills in digital literacy and innovative teaching practices to align with global educational trends.
2. **Securing Sustainable Funding and Resources:** The school should seek additional funding sources, such as partnerships with private organizations, alumni networks, and government grants, to support the sustainability of its programs. This would help address the challenges related to limited infrastructure and ensure that educational improvements are maintained in the long term.
3. **Enhancing ICT Integration:** While significant progress has been made in integrating ICT into classrooms, further efforts should be directed toward increasing access to digital tools for both teachers and students. This includes providing more advanced training for teachers on using technology to enhance learning and expanding the availability of digital resources for students.
4. **Developing a Long-Term Strategic Plan:** The school should develop a comprehensive long-term strategic plan that includes clear goals for further improvements in academic outcomes, infrastructure development, and resource management. This plan should be flexible enough to adapt to future challenges while maintaining the school's focus on continuous improvement.
5. **Collaboration with Educational Stakeholders:** The principal should continue to foster collaboration with local and regional educational authorities, as well as community stakeholders, to ensure broader support for the school's initiatives. This collaboration can help in sharing best practices and securing resources that may not be available internally.

By addressing these areas, SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan can continue to build on its successes and serve as a model for other schools in similar resource-constrained environments. Strong leadership, combined with strategic planning and sustainable resource management, will be key to maintaining and further improving educational quality at the school.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

While this study provides valuable insights into the leadership strategies at SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan and their impact on improving educational quality, there are limitations that warrant further exploration. One key limitation of this research is its focus on a single school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Although the case study approach allows for a deep understanding of the context and specific challenges faced by the school,

the insights gained may not fully apply to other schools in different regions or with varying levels of resources.

Moreover, the study primarily relies on qualitative data, which, while rich and detailed, could benefit from the inclusion of quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of the leadership strategies. For example, collecting and analyzing quantitative metrics on student performance, teacher development, and resource utilization over a broader range of schools could provide more robust conclusions about the general effectiveness of these strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to all those who have contributed to the completion of this research. Special thanks go to the principal, teachers, and staff of SMAN Unggul Aceh Selatan for their invaluable cooperation and willingness to participate in this study.

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