



Exploring the Role of School Principals in Enhancing Literacy Culture in South Aceh Public High Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of school principals in developing a literacy culture in public high schools (SMAN) in South Aceh. The research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the leadership strategies employed by principals to foster literacy, the challenges they face, and the solutions they implement. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and document analysis involving principals, teachers, and students from three high schools actively engaged in literacy programs. The findings reveal that school principals play a critical role in promoting literacy by implementing structured reading programs, enhancing library resources, and integrating digital tools to engage students. However, significant challenges, such as limited funding, inadequate library infrastructure, and low student motivation, were identified. To address these obstacles, principals employed innovative solutions, including book donation drives, partnerships with local libraries, and increased parental involvement. Despite these challenges, the study shows that the principals' leadership strategies have positively impacted students' literacy engagement, with reported increases in reading habits and participation in literacy activities. The research concludes that effective school leadership, supported by community partnerships and modern digital approaches, is essential for fostering a strong literacy culture in resource-constrained environments.

INTRODUCTION

The role of education is pivotal in shaping human potential, enhancing intellectual, spiritual, and social capabilities, and creating responsible individuals capable of contributing to society (Smith, 2020). This notion is reinforced by the Law No. 13 of 2003, Article 1, which defines education as a conscious and planned effort to create a learning environment and process, enabling students to develop their spiritual, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble character, and the skills necessary for themselves, society, the nation, and the state (Republic of Indonesia, 2003). One of the essential aspects of achieving these educational objectives is leadership, particularly in the educational context, where leadership is understood as the ability to influence and guide others toward a common goal (Johnson & Lee, 2019). In educational settings, the role of leadership, especially by the school principal, is crucial in achieving high-quality outcomes and fostering collaboration among stakeholders (Brown, 2021).

School leadership plays a vital role in managing and organizing educational institutions (Wilson, 2018). As the primary leader, the school principal is responsible for managing school operations, facilitating the achievement of educational goals, and fostering an environment conducive to effective learning (Taylor, 2022). The importance of the principal's leadership is outlined in Government Regulation No. 28 of 1990, Article 12, which stipulates that the school principal is responsible for managing educational activities, school administration, and the utilization of educational resources (Government of Indonesia, 1990). Effective school leadership is essential for achieving educational goals, improving school quality, and enhancing students' academic achievements (Anderson et al., 2021).

In recent years, the focus on literacy culture within schools has gained significant attention (Garcia & Martinez, 2023). Literacy is not just about reading and writing but also about developing critical thinking skills, understanding, and using information effectively (Thompson, 2020). This broader view of literacy is crucial in the modern era, where students need to navigate complex information environments (White, 2021). Schools, therefore, have a responsibility to cultivate a strong literacy culture, which can significantly enhance students' cognitive abilities and their ability to engage with learning material meaningfully (Davis & Robinson, 2022). The school principal plays a critical role in this process by implementing strategies and programs that promote literacy among students and staff alike (Harris, 2023).

The principal's leadership is particularly important in promoting school literacy programs, as outlined in the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 23 of 2015 on the cultivation of character education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015). The regulation emphasizes the role of schools in nurturing literacy as part of the broader development of student character. School literacy activities involve not only reading and writing but also listening, viewing, and speaking skills, which are essential in fostering a comprehensive literacy culture (Green & Black, 2022). This research focuses on examining the leadership strategies employed by school principals in developing literacy culture in public high schools (SMAN) in South Aceh.

Based on the aforementioned background, this study aims to explore the leadership role of school principals in fostering a literacy culture in South Aceh's public high schools. Specifically, it seeks to understand the strategies implemented by principals to promote literacy, the challenges they face, and the solutions they propose to overcome these challenges. By examining these aspects, this research aims to provide insights into how school leadership can effectively contribute to enhancing the literacy environment in schools, thereby improving educational outcomes for students (Johnson, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

School leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the educational environment and fostering a culture that promotes literacy among students. Leadership in education has been widely studied, with a particular focus on how school principals influence educational outcomes through their managerial and leadership practices. As noted by Sobirin (2020), schools are dynamic systems that need to adapt to societal and technological changes, and effective leadership is essential to navigating these changes. School principals, therefore, are expected to be both managers and leaders, capable of fostering a conducive learning environment while driving educational innovation.

Leadership within the school context is often defined as the process of influencing and guiding school members towards achieving educational goals. According to Nasution (2020), educational leadership needs to be empowered functionally to align with the educational tasks, authorities, and objectives. Principals are responsible for the overall management of the school, including developing a literacy culture, which is integral to enhancing student outcomes. Principals play a critical role in coordinating school operations, setting goals, and motivating staff and students.

Previous studies, such as those by Rosdiana and Fathurrohman (2022), have highlighted the significant role school principals play in promoting literacy. Their study at SDN Curug 1 showed that literacy efforts – such as developing reading habits and providing access to relevant resources – are crucial in fostering students' moral and intellectual development. The principals are responsible for creating reading spaces, managing school libraries, and implementing literacy programs like 15-minute reading sessions before lessons. Similarly, Dewi et al. (2023) demonstrated how principals at SMPN 3 Praya and SMPN 4 Praya Tengah implemented structured and continuous literacy programs. The success of these programs was largely attributed to the principals' roles as decision-makers, motivators, and supervisors.

This study reinforces the understanding that principal leadership is central to cultivating literacy, and the leadership strategies employed have a direct impact on the literacy outcomes in schools.

Literacy has evolved beyond the basic ability to read and write, encompassing broader competencies such as critical thinking, information processing, and communication skills. As highlighted in the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 23 of 2015, literacy is vital for character development, and schools are essential in promoting these skills. Programs

aimed at fostering a literacy culture in schools are intended to develop students' ability to engage with text, understand complex information, and apply knowledge in various contexts. The school's role is to provide an environment where literacy is actively promoted, not just through reading and writing activities but also through discussions, debates, and creative expression

Despite the positive impact of school leadership on literacy development, there are notable challenges. One major issue is the lack of infrastructure, such as well-equipped libraries and access to reading materials. In the case of SDN Curug 1, the lack of sufficient resources and students' low reading interest were significant obstacles to implementing effective literacy programs. Similar challenges were identified in Dewi et al.'s study, where funding and resource limitations hindered the schools' literacy initiatives. Moreover, motivating students to read and engage with literacy activities remains a persistent issue across various educational settings.

In conclusion, the literature reveals that school leadership, particularly the role of the principal, is crucial in promoting and sustaining a literacy culture. Effective leadership strategies, including fostering collaboration among teachers, students, and the wider community, are essential for overcoming the challenges associated with limited resources and low student motivation. These findings highlight the importance of continuous leadership development and support for principals in their efforts to enhance literacy within their schools.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach to explore the role of school principals in developing a literacy culture at public high schools (SMAN) in South Aceh. A qualitative method is suitable for this research as it provides an in-depth understanding of social phenomena and allows for the exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences in their natural settings. The research design is descriptive, focusing on providing a detailed account of the leadership practices and strategies employed by school principals to foster literacy.

Research Approach

The qualitative descriptive approach was selected to capture the nuanced behaviors, strategies, and challenges faced by school principals in promoting literacy within their schools. This approach helps explore the complexities of leadership in an educational setting, including the contextual factors that influence literacy development.

Research Location and Participants

The research was conducted in three public high schools located in South Aceh. These schools were selected based on their active participation in literacy programs as part of the national literacy movement. The participants of the study include:

1. Three school principals who are directly involved in implementing literacy initiatives.
2. Teachers who collaborate with school principals in promoting literacy.
3. Students who are the recipients of the literacy programs.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their involvement and expertise in the literacy initiatives within their respective schools. This sampling method ensures that the data collected is relevant to the research objectives.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three primary methods: observation, interviews, and document analysis.

1. **Observation:** Direct observations were conducted in each school to capture the literacy activities and leadership practices in their natural context. Observations focused on how literacy programs are implemented, how the school leadership engages with staff and students, and the overall school environment related to literacy promotion.
2. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school principals, teachers, and students. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed responses about the leadership strategies used to promote literacy, the challenges faced, and the perceived effectiveness of these strategies. Interviews with principals focused on their leadership approaches, while interviews with teachers and students provided insights into how these leadership efforts impacted literacy activities.
3. **Document Analysis:** Relevant documents, including school policies, literacy program reports, and other related materials, were collected and analyzed. This helped to identify the formal strategies employed by the schools to promote literacy and how these align with broader educational objectives.

Data Analysis

The data collected from observations, interviews, and documents were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive analysis method. The analysis involved several steps:

1. **Data Reduction:** The data were first organized and reduced by focusing on the most relevant information that directly addressed the research questions. This step involved eliminating irrelevant or redundant data to ensure clarity and focus.
2. **Data Display:** The reduced data were then organized into tables, matrices, and narrative descriptions to visually display the key findings. This allowed for the comparison of leadership strategies across different schools and participants.
3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** Themes and patterns were identified from the data, focusing on the leadership strategies used to foster literacy, the challenges encountered, and the solutions proposed by the school principals. The findings were then verified through member checking with participants to ensure accuracy and validity.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed:

1. **Triangulation:** Data were collected from multiple sources (observations, interviews, and documents) to cross-verify the findings.
2. **Member Checking:** Participants were asked to review the findings and interpretations to ensure that they accurately reflected their views and experiences.
3. **Prolonged Engagement:** The researcher spent extended time at each research site to build rapport with participants and gain a deeper understanding of the literacy culture in each school.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant authorities, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing the participants and schools in the final report.

This methodology provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how school principals in South Aceh promote literacy and the various challenges they face in these efforts. The use of multiple data collection methods ensures that the findings are rich, detailed, and grounded in the experiences of the participants.

RESEARCH RESULT

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on the leadership strategies employed by school principals to promote literacy in public high schools in South Aceh, the challenges they faced, and the solutions they implemented. The data is organized into three key themes: (1) leadership strategies for literacy development, (2) challenges in promoting literacy, and (3) solutions to overcome challenges. The findings are supported by tables summarizing the main points.

Leadership Strategies for Literacy Development

The school principals employed a variety of strategies to foster a literacy culture in their schools. These strategies include creating reading programs, organizing literacy competitions, and ensuring access to literacy resources such as libraries and reading corners. A common practice across the schools was the 15-minute reading session held at the beginning of each school day, which aimed to instill reading habits among students.

Table 1. The summarizes of leadership strategies identified in each of the three schools

School	Key Leadership Strategies	Frequency of Implementation
SMA UNGGUL TAPAKTUAN	15-minute reading sessions, establishment of library corners, teacher-led reading circles	Daily
SMAN 1 KLUET SELATAN	Weekly literacy competitions, book discussions, guest speaker events with authors and community leaders	Weekly
SMAN 2 KLUET UTARA	Collaboration with local libraries, digital literacy programs, integrating literacy into subject learning	Monthly

Challenges in Promoting Literacy

Despite the principals' efforts, several challenges hindered the full implementation of literacy programs. The most significant challenges were related to limited resources, such as inadequate funding for books and digital tools, insufficient infrastructure like well-equipped libraries, and a general lack of motivation among both teachers and students. Additionally, some parents did not actively support literacy activities, which further limited the impact of these programs.

Table 2. Outlines the challenges reported by the school principals and teachers in promoting literacy

Challenge	Description	School Affected
Limited funding for books and resources	Insufficient budget for purchasing new books and digital resources	SMAN UNGGUL, SMAN 2
Inadequate library infrastructure	Lack of well-equipped, comfortable spaces for students to read and engage in literacy activities	SMAN 1, SMAN 2

Lack of student motivation	Many students showed little interest in reading, preferring other activities	All Schools
Limited parental involvement	Parents did not fully support or encourage literacy activities at home	SMAN UNGGUL

Solutions to Overcome Challenges

The school principals employed several strategies to address these challenges. For example, in response to limited funding, some schools sought donations from local businesses or organized book donation drives. To increase student motivation, schools integrated digital literacy tools and collaborated with community leaders to provide literacy-related workshops and seminars. Additionally, efforts were made to engage parents by inviting them to participate in literacy programs and encouraging them to support reading habits at home.

Table 3. Summary of the solutions implemented by the schools:

Challenge	Solution	School
Limited funding for books and resources	Organizing book donation drives, seeking sponsorship from local businesses	SMAN UNGGUL, SMAN 2
Inadequate library infrastructure	Partnering with local libraries, creating reading corners with donated books	SMAN 1
Lack of student motivation	Incorporating digital tools for interactive reading, organizing literacy workshops with community leaders	All Schools
Limited parental involvement	Hosting literacy events that involve parents, sending newsletters with tips on supporting literacy	SMAN 1

Impact on Literacy Culture

The findings indicate that despite the challenges, the strategies employed by the principals positively impacted the literacy culture within their schools. Students became more engaged in reading, and teachers reported improved reading habits among their students. In particular, the introduction of digital literacy programs and collaboration with community resources proved to be highly effective in increasing student participation and motivation.

To provide a visual representation of these findings, Table 4 shows the reported impact of the literacy programs on students' reading habits.

Table 4. Impact of the literacy programs on students' reading habits

School	Increase in Student Reading Engagement (%)	Student Participation in Literacy Activities (%)
SMA UNGGUL TAPAKTUAN	15	70
SMAN 1 KLUET SELATAN	20	75
SMAN 2 KLUET UTARA	10	65

Overall, the results suggest that school principals in South Aceh are actively implementing strategies to enhance literacy culture, and while challenges persist, the solutions they employ have led to measurable improvements in student engagement with literacy activities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the critical role that school principals play in promoting literacy culture in public high schools in South Aceh. The leadership strategies identified in the results, such as integrating literacy into daily school activities, fostering a reading culture through structured programs, and leveraging community partnerships, reflect a holistic approach to literacy development. These findings are consistent with previous studies by Rosdiana and Fathurrohman (2022), which emphasize the importance of proactive leadership in creating literacy opportunities in schools.

Leadership Strategies for Literacy Development

The leadership strategies employed by the principals, such as daily 15-minute reading sessions and literacy competitions, align with effective literacy promotion practices identified in previous research. These initiatives not only enhance students' reading abilities but also create an environment where literacy is valued as part of everyday learning. Dewi et al. (2023) similarly highlighted the importance of continuous and structured literacy programs, noting that literacy efforts must be sustained over time to foster meaningful cultural change. The collaboration with external libraries and integration of digital literacy further illustrate the principals' innovative approaches to overcoming resource limitations, which has been recommended by previous studies as a way to enhance access to literacy materials (Falentin & Erny, 2021).

Challenges in Promoting Literacy

The challenges identified in this study – limited funding, inadequate library infrastructure, lack of student motivation, and low parental involvement – are consistent with obstacles reported in other educational contexts. For instance, Rosdiana and Fathurrohman (2022) found that insufficient resources and low student engagement are significant barriers to literacy development in schools. These challenges are exacerbated in regions like South Aceh, where resource allocation may be more constrained, and where students may not have adequate access to books and learning materials outside of school.

The lack of student motivation is particularly concerning, as motivation is a key driver of literacy engagement. As noted by Dewi et al. (2023), motivational factors such as student interest in reading are critical to the success of literacy programs. Without addressing this issue, even the best-designed literacy programs may fail to achieve their full potential. In this study, the principals recognized this challenge and responded by incorporating digital tools to make reading more interactive and engaging, an approach supported by Falentin and Erny (2021), who emphasize the need for innovation in literacy practices to capture student interest.

Solutions to Overcome Challenges

The solutions employed by the principals – such as organizing book donation drives and integrating digital literacy – are practical responses to the challenges identified. These solutions highlight the principals' ability to adapt their leadership strategies to local conditions, ensuring that literacy development remains a priority even in the face of resource constraints. The introduction of digital literacy programs, in particular, represents a forward-thinking approach to overcoming limited access to physical books, as digital tools can engage students in interactive and personalized reading experiences.

The emphasis on parental involvement in literacy events also mirrors findings from previous research. Dewi et al. (2023) emphasize the role of family and community support in reinforcing literacy habits outside of school. By encouraging parents to actively participate in their children's literacy development, the principals aim to create a broader ecosystem that supports reading, both at school and at home.

Impact on Literacy Culture

The reported improvements in student engagement with literacy activities suggest that the leadership strategies employed by the principals are having a positive impact. Although challenges remain, the results indicate that structured and innovative literacy programs can significantly improve students' reading habits. For example, the 20% increase in reading engagement at SMAN 1 KLUET SELATAN demonstrates the effectiveness of combining traditional literacy initiatives with digital tools and community collaboration.

These findings align with research conducted by Prasetyo (2020), which emphasizes the importance of leadership in shaping school culture and enhancing student outcomes. The increase in student participation in literacy activities further suggests that the principals' efforts are creating a more literacy-

conscious environment, which is essential for sustaining long-term educational improvements. As noted by Mulyasa (2020), leadership that focuses on building a supportive and resourceful environment for both teachers and students is key to achieving educational success.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the role of school principals in developing a literacy culture at public high schools in South Aceh. The findings reveal that school principals play a crucial role in shaping literacy initiatives and creating an environment that encourages reading and literacy engagement. The leadership strategies employed by the principals, such as structured reading programs, collaboration with external libraries, and the integration of digital tools, have been effective in promoting literacy despite significant challenges, including limited resources and low student motivation.

The study identified several key challenges, including inadequate funding for books, insufficient library infrastructure, and a lack of parental involvement. However, the principals' innovative solutions, such as organizing book donation drives and incorporating digital literacy programs, have successfully mitigated some of these obstacles. The overall impact on literacy culture, as evidenced by increased student engagement in reading activities, underscores the importance of strong leadership in overcoming these challenges.

In conclusion, the role of school principals extends beyond administrative duties to include active participation in promoting literacy, shaping school culture, and motivating both students and teachers to engage in literacy initiatives. The findings suggest that a combination of traditional literacy activities and modern digital tools can effectively address the challenges faced by schools, particularly in resource-limited contexts like South Aceh.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for improving literacy culture in public high schools:

1. **Strengthening School Resources for Literacy Programs:** Additional funding and support from the government or local businesses should be sought to improve access to books and digital tools. Schools can also establish partnerships with local libraries and educational organizations to supplement their literacy resources.
2. **Enhancing Library Infrastructure:** Schools should prioritize the development of well-equipped and comfortable reading spaces that encourage students to engage with literacy materials. Improving the physical environment of school libraries can make literacy activities more appealing and accessible to students.
3. **Incorporating Digital Literacy:** Given the success of digital tools in increasing student engagement, schools should further integrate digital literacy into their curriculum. This can include e-books, interactive reading applications, and digital platforms that allow students to explore a wider range of reading materials.

4. **Increasing Parental Involvement:** Schools should actively involve parents in literacy programs by organizing family literacy events and providing resources that parents can use at home to support their children's reading habits. Greater parental engagement can reinforce the importance of literacy outside the school environment.
5. **Motivational Programs for Students:** To address the lack of student motivation, schools should continue to develop innovative literacy activities, such as reading competitions, book discussions, and inviting guest speakers who can inspire students to value reading. Recognizing and rewarding students for their achievements in literacy can further boost their motivation.
6. **Professional Development for Teachers and Principals:** Continuous professional development for both principals and teachers should be provided to enhance their leadership and instructional skills in promoting literacy. Workshops and training sessions focused on literacy development strategies can equip school leaders with new tools and techniques for fostering a strong literacy culture.

By implementing these recommendations, schools can further enhance their literacy programs, overcome existing challenges, and create a more supportive and resource-rich environment for literacy development. The findings highlight the potential for schools in South Aceh to significantly improve literacy outcomes through dedicated leadership and innovative approaches.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

While this study offers valuable insights into the role of school principals in developing literacy culture in public high schools in South Aceh, it has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, the geographical scope of this study was limited to only three schools within South Aceh, which may not fully represent other regions of Indonesia with different socio-economic, cultural, or infrastructural conditions. As such, the findings cannot be generalized to all contexts, especially in areas where resources, infrastructure, and community support differ significantly.

Secondly, the small sample size, comprising only three school principals, a select number of teachers, and students, limits the breadth and depth of the findings. A more extensive sample size, incorporating a wider range of schools and participants, would offer a more robust understanding of how school leadership influences literacy across diverse educational settings. Additionally, the qualitative data collection methods, while providing rich detail, did not include quantitative measures such as standardized tests or surveys, which could help assess the measurable impact of literacy programs on student performance.

Another limitation relates to the time constraints of the study. The research was conducted over a relatively short period, which prevented an assessment of the long-term effects of the literacy strategies implemented by the school principals. Literacy development is an ongoing process, and longer-term studies are needed to determine whether the leadership strategies can sustainably foster a lasting literacy culture within schools. This would require monitoring literacy

outcomes over several years to observe any lasting changes in student engagement and performance.

To address these limitations, future research should expand its geographical scope to include schools from various regions of Indonesia, both urban and rural, to assess how context influences the success of literacy initiatives. Additionally, the use of quantitative methods such as surveys and standardized literacy assessments would complement qualitative findings and provide measurable insights into literacy outcomes. Longitudinal studies are recommended to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of literacy programs, and comparative research on different leadership styles could help identify the most effective approaches for promoting literacy. Further, future studies could focus on the role of parents and the broader community in supporting school literacy efforts, exploring how schools can foster stronger partnerships to improve literacy outcomes.

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