



## School Principal Leadership Strategies in Improving Educational Quality: Evidence from SMA Negeri 1 Geureudong Pase

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### ABSTRACT

School leadership is widely accepted as being critically important for the quality of education, but there is a lack of empirical evidence on leadership practices in rural secondary schools, especially in geographically remote areas in developing countries. This qualitative single-case study investigates the strategic efforts of a rural public secondary school principal of SMA Negeri 1 Geureudong Pase to improve educational quality in the face of significant contextual constraints. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the principal, vice principals, teachers, school committee members and administrative staff, classroom and school observations and document analysis. Iterative thematic analysis was employed to reduce the data, code and categorise it, and triangulate across sources to establish credibility and trustworthiness. The results point to three interrelated approaches to leadership: transformational and visionary leadership that created a shared vision and culture of collaboration; instructional leadership operationalised through supervision, mentoring and professional learning; and distributed, community-oriented leadership that increased capacity through teacher empowerment and stakeholder partnerships. Teacher commitment and community participation supported these strategies, despite the continued challenges of geographic isolation, limited facilities, and teacher shortages. The integrated approach resulted in improvements in teaching quality, student achievement, discipline and stakeholder's trust. The study adds to the literature on contextual school leadership and has practical implications for leadership development and policy in remote educational environments.

### 1. Introduction

Education systems are becoming increasingly eager to prepare students with the knowledge, competencies and adaptive capacities to flourish in increasingly complex social, economic and technological contexts, making quality in education a global priority (Rahimi & Oh, 2024). International policy agendas, such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), advocate for equal access to quality education and recognise effective school leadership as one of the most important school-level factors in educational progress (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022). However, teachers have a direct impact on learning in the classroom. School principals are important for the development of organisational conditions for effective teaching, professional collaboration, innovation and

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sustainable school development. Thus, leadership has been shifting from administration to a strategic process where principals use human, organisational, and community resources to improve the quality of education(Mincu, 2022).

A growing body of international research has demonstrated that the effects of school leadership on educational outcomes are largely indirect(Damri et al., 2023). Effective principals do not have a direct effect on student achievement, but they do create school culture, improve teacher professionalism, create collaborative learning environments, and develop instructional capacity throughout the school(Pardosi & Utari, 2022). Models of contemporary leadership, including transformational, instructional, distributed and servant leadership, are all linked to higher levels of teacher commitment, instructional quality, school effectiveness and student learning(Bandur et al., 2021). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that quality in education is not only a matter of efficient management, but also of leadership practices that include vision, professional learning, organisational development, and stakeholder collaboration(Daulay et al., 2024).

Among these perspectives, transformational leadership emphasises the importance of inspiring a shared vision, fostering commitment to the organization, motivating teachers to continuously improve, and cultivating innovation within the entire school community(Masaong et al., 2023). Instructional leadership is about improving teaching and learning through curriculum management, academic supervision, classroom observation, assessment monitoring and sustained professional development. Distributed leadership takes leadership beyond the principal and promotes shared responsibility, collaborative decision-making and collective organisational capacity(Effendi & Sahertian, 2022). More recently, contextual and adaptive leadership perspectives have posited that leadership effectiveness is based not on universal leadership practices but on principals' ability to interpret and respond to the unique cultural, geographical, institutional, and socioeconomic characteristics of their schools(Hariyati et al., 2023).

Although there is a large body of empirical evidence to support the positive contribution of school leadership to educational improvement, most of the existing studies have been conducted in urban schools or education systems that have relatively adequate infrastructure, stable teacher supply and institutional support(Irfan et al., 2025). Thus, most leadership theories have been developed and validated in contexts that are quite different from rural schools functioning with persistent resource constraints(Sumintono et al., 2023). The assumption that leadership strategies effective in metropolitan schools are directly transferable to geographically isolated schools, is still insufficiently tested. In rural schools, the challenges are multifaceted and go beyond instructional leadership to include teacher shortages, inadequate educational facilities, limited professional development opportunities, limited financial resources, weak technological infrastructure, and geographical isolation(Nurjaya et al., 2025). These conditions call for strategic, adaptive and collaborative leadership on the part of principals and deep responsiveness to local realities(Mandak & Astuti, 2026).

Leadership in rural schools encompasses more than mere administrative coordination; it necessitates that principals act as instructional leaders, organisational innovators, community mobilisers, and advocates for educational equity(Mandak & Astuti, 2026). In situations of resource scarcity, the enhancement of schools is significantly reliant on principals' ability to optimise current human resources, bolster teacher motivation despite minimal incentives, cultivate collaborative professional cultures, forge partnerships with parents and local communities, and convert environmental limitations into opportunities for organisational learning(Khalifah et al., 2026). This leadership exemplifies a contextually rooted process where organisational efficiency arises from ongoing adaptation rather than the application of uniform management methods(Sasaki et al., 2024).

The Indonesian educational landscape offers a significant framework for analysing contextual school leadership (Hurriah et al., 2025). Notwithstanding significant educational changes, including as curriculum transformation, school-based management, teacher professional development efforts, and national quality assurance systems, notable discrepancies persist between urban and rural schools (Bahri & Marshitah, 2026). Secondary schools in remote areas persistently encounter disparities in access to competent educators, inadequate facilities, constrained professional development opportunities, and geographical obstacles that hinder the provision of educational services. The structural inequities indicate that enhancing educational quality in rural Indonesia relies not solely on policy initiatives but also on the strategic leadership abilities of school administrators functioning within severely constrained organisational contexts (Ilyas & Musriadi, 2026).

Geographical diversity poses significant problems to education, as seen by Aceh Province. Numerous secondary schools cater to remote populations, frequently situated far from district administrative hubs, with little access to educational resources, external oversight, or continuous professional development. In these situations, principals frequently assume various leadership positions that surpass conventional managerial responsibilities. They are anticipated to manage constrained resources, sustain teacher motivation, bolster community trust, and guarantee the continuity of educational excellence despite ongoing institutional limitations. Comprehending how effective principals navigate these issues can provide valuable insights into leadership approaches that promote equitable educational advancement in rural areas.

SMA Negeri 1 Geureudong Pase in North Aceh Regency exemplifies these contextual factors. As a public secondary school situated in a rural community, it encounters numerous challenges to educational quality, including insufficient instructional facilities, disparities in student academic performance, a shortage of teachers in certain subject areas, and restricted opportunities for ongoing professional development due to geographical isolation. The school continues to implement improvement efforts through strategic leadership methods emphasising cooperation, instructional supervision, organisational commitment, and community engagement. The circumstances render the school an appropriate subject for examining the implementation of leadership techniques in environments characterised by scarce resources and enduring ambitions for educational excellence.

Notwithstanding the increasing academic focus on school leadership, significant gaps persist in the study. The scholarship has primarily focused on the efficacy of individual leadership models in isolation, such as transformational, instructional, or distributed leadership, while practical school leadership frequently amalgamates various approaches concurrently. Secondly, empirical research specifically targeting rural secondary schools in developing countries remains scarce, particularly in comparison to studies conducted in urban educational settings. Third, little emphasis has been devoted to comprehending how leadership methods are tailored to mitigate structural constraints associated with geographic remoteness, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted organisational capability. Thus, there exists a deficiency in comprehending how effective principals integrate diverse leadership techniques to enhance sustained educational quality in resource-constrained rural schools.

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology to examine the primary leadership tactics implemented at SMA Negeri 1 Geureudong Pase. The study analyses leadership behaviours within the specific organisational and social environment of the school, rather than assessing leadership using established theoretical frameworks. The study examines the formulation, implementation, and experience of leadership techniques by members of the school community via the complimentary analytical lenses of transformational, instructional, distributed, and contextual leadership perspectives.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Research Approach and Design*

This study examined the impact of principal leadership techniques on enhancing educational quality in a rural secondary school through a qualitative single-case study methodology. A qualitative case study is appropriate for examining intricate social phenomena inside their natural environment, allowing researchers to attain a comprehensive grasp of participants' experiences, organisational dynamics, and contextual factors (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The study did not involve hypothesis testing. The study analysed the formulation, implementation, and perception of leadership techniques among members of the school community.

This study focused on SMA Negeri 1 Geureudong Pase, located in North Aceh Regency, Aceh Province, Indonesia. The school was intentionally chosen due to its status as a rural public secondary institution facing numerous educational challenges, including geographic isolation, insufficient educational infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers in various subjects, and restricted opportunities for ongoing professional development. Nonetheless, the school has consistently endeavoured to enhance educational quality through strategic leadership initiatives, rendering it a valuable case for the examination of contextual school leadership.

The research was framed under an interpretivist paradigm, positing that leadership is socially formed through interactions among school leaders, teachers, staff, students, and the broader community. Consequently, comprehending leadership effectiveness necessitates an examination of participants' perspectives within the organisational and cultural context where leadership activities occur.

### *2.2 Research Setting and Period*

This study was performed at SMA Negeri 1 Geureudong Pase during the 2025/2026 academic year. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling to encompass individuals directly engaged in the planning, execution, and assessment of the principal's leadership practices. Eligible participants had a minimum of two years of service in their particular jobs and had direct engagement in school planning, instructional supervision, or decision-making processes pertaining to leadership practices. Nine individuals participated: the school principal, two vice principals, four teachers, one school committee member, and one administrative staff member. The researchers utilised this sample approach to select information-rich cases possessing substantial knowledge on school management, instructional enhancement, and organisational decision-making. This provided a thorough understanding of the leadership tactics utilised to enhance educational quality.

### *2.5 Instrumentation and Data Collection*

The principal data collection approach employed was semi-structured interviews, facilitating participants to articulate their experiences and perspectives with flexibility, while enabling the researcher to explore pertinent emerging problems aligned with the study's aims. The interview protocol was formulated according to the conceptual dimensions of transformational, instructional, distributed, and contextual leadership, emphasizing the principal's vision for school enhancement, leadership strategies for educational quality improvement, instructional supervision, teacher professional development, decision-making, stakeholder collaboration, contextual enabling and constraining factors, and the perceived influence of leadership on school performance. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, was audio recorded with the participants' full consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim to provide thorough qualitative analysis.

## **2.6 Data Analysis**

Data were processed iteratively in conjunction with data collection through a thematic analysis technique, facilitating the continuous refinement of emerging insights while being anchored in participants' experiences. The analysis commenced with the verbatim transcription of the interview recordings and the systematic organising of observational notes and documentary data. The researcher thereafter reviewed the data multiple times to familiarise themselves with it and to discern significant units pertaining to leadership practices and educational quality enhancement. Preliminary codes were generated inductively from significant remarks, events, and organisational practices, subsequently categorised into broader classifications by ongoing comparison. The categories were synthesised into overarching themes that elucidated the implementation of the principal's leadership techniques, the contextual elements influencing their efficacy, and their contribution to educational quality. The emerging themes were analysed via the lens of sensitising notions related to transformational, instructional, distributed, and contextual leadership, rather than through predetermined analytical frameworks. Thematic interpretations were systematically revised through the comparison of evidence from interviews, observations, and documents, thereby augmenting analytical rigour. The final themes were substantiated by representative participant quotations and triangulated evidence from several data sources.

## **3. Results**

The thematic analysis revealed three interconnected themes that support the principal's leadership strategies aimed at improving educational quality: (1) strategic leadership practices for school enhancement, (2) contextual factors influencing leadership execution, and (3) educational outcomes resulting from strategic leadership. The findings indicate that enhancing the educational quality of a rural secondary school is achieved not through a singular leadership style, but through a synthesis of leadership practices: transformational, instructional, distributed, and contextual, appropriately tailored to the school's organisational and environmental context.

### **3.1 Strategic Leadership Practices for Educational Quality Improvements**

The analysis of interview, observation, and documentary data indicated that the principal used a comprehensive leadership approach that blended transformational, instructional, distributed, and community-oriented leadership practices. Rather than focusing only on administrative authority, the principal focused on collaboration, professional learning, collective responsibility, and continuous instructional improvement.

#### **a. Developing a Shared Vision and Organizational Commitment**

A key finding was that the administrator successfully cultivated a collective vision for school enhancement. Participants said that the school vision was not merely a declaration for the institution but was consistently reinforced through staff meetings, teacher discussions, school ceremonies, and daily organizational activities. Teachers described the principal as consistently encouraging collective responsibility for educational quality while emphasizing that school improvement depended on collaborative commitment rather than individual performance. This shared vision fostered stronger organizational cohesion and increased teachers' willingness to participate in improvement initiatives despite existing resource limitation.

A senior teacher explained:

*"The principal always reminds us that improving the school is everyone's responsibility. Every meeting begins by discussing our shared goals, not merely administrative matters."*

Observational data further showed that strategic planning meetings encouraged open dialogue, allowing teachers to contribute ideas regarding curriculum implementation, extracurricular activities, and student development programs.

b. Strengthening Instructional Leadership

A second core strategy was ongoing instructional leadership aimed directly at improving teaching and learning. The classroom observations in this study did not constitute the usual administrative supervision but were more akin to professional reflection than purely evaluation exercises.

Teachers reported that classroom supervision was always accompanied with constructive criticism, especially on instructional planning, classroom management, student engagement and assessment practices. These follow-up discussions often led to individualized mentoring and collaborative attempts to improve lesson delivery.

Documentary evidence also showed that supervision activities were systematically integrated into the school's annual academic calendar, suggesting that instructional improvement was viewed as a strategic institutional priority rather than an occasional or ad hoc administrative task.

One participant noted:

*" After classroom observation, the principal discusses our teaching individually. We are encouraged to improve, not criticized."*

Observations further indicated that the principal regularly monitored curriculum implementation, coordinated teacher meetings, reviewed students' learning progress, and encouraged collaborative lesson planning among teachers.

c. Promoting Teacher Professional Learning

The analysis also identified ongoing efforts to improve teacher professionalism, although opportunities for external training were limited. The school was geographically isolated and therefore could not participate in regional professional development programs and instead relied on internal capacity building initiatives as an alternative. Teachers reported that these activities fostered collegial relationships and reduced the professional isolation that often accompanies rural school settings.

One teacher stated:

*"Although opportunities outside the school are limited, we continue learning from one another through regular internal discussions."*

### *3.2 Contextual Factors Influencing Leadership Implementation*

Participants recognized various organizational qualities that facilitated instructional enhancement, each fulfilling a distinct yet interconnected function in the school's ability for continuous development.

A notable strength was the elevated dedication of the teachers. Teachers consistently demonstrated a strong sense of professional responsibility and a readiness to engage in school development initiatives, despite inadequate facilities and constrained resources. This devotion was demonstrated not only through routine instructional responsibilities but also through volunteer engagement in extracurricular programs, peer mentoring, and school-based professional development initiatives. This indicates that intrinsic motivation, as opposed to externally imposed incentives, was a crucial element in maintaining teacher performance in resource-limited environments.

Furthermore, collaboration inside the school bolstered reform initiatives by fostering a culture of transparent communication, collaborative problem-solving, and professional support among educators. Collaborative methods were included into the formal frameworks of subject-specific teacher groups and regular staff meetings, alongside informal encounters that promoted the exchange of teaching strategies and classroom experiences. This collegial culture appeared to mitigate the professional isolation frequently associated with rural teaching situations while also fostering a shared feeling of accountability for the overall outcomes of the school.

Community trust was also vital, creating beneficial cooperation between the school and local groups, and strengthening institutional legitimacy. Parents, community leaders, and the school committee were reported to provide active material and social support for school programming. This aligns with the overarching trend of robust school-community partnerships mitigating insufficient governmental or infrastructural assistance in geographically distant regions. This trust appeared to evolve progressively, facilitated by continuous dialogue and the principal's evident attentiveness to community issues.

Participants identified the principal's personal leadership traits, including integrity, consistency, openness, and effective interpersonal interactions, as significant factors influencing organizational commitment. These attributes were deemed crucial for establishing credibility with educators and stakeholders, as well as for fostering an organizational environment in which personnel recognized confidence in the equity and direction of leadership decisions. The participants emphasized that these relational attributes were equally crucial in influencing organizational commitment as the principal's formal strategic and administrative actions, underscoring the interpersonal aspect of effective leadership in resource-limited rural environments.

### *3.3 Educational Outcomes of Strategic Leadership*

The results indicate that teachers have experienced professional growth subsequent to the implementation of ongoing academic oversight and structured professional mentorship. During interviews, teachers indicated that they were regularly more assured in formulating instructional plans that corresponded with curricular objectives, student learning requirements, and anticipated learning outcomes. They indicated an enhanced capacity to develop quantifiable learning objectives, choose suitable teaching strategies, and incorporate varied educational materials into classroom implementation. The participants attributed their increasing confidence to the consistent feedback from their supervisors and the collaborative mentoring sessions that promoted reflective practice and ongoing educational advancement.

Moreover, educators observed a substantial rise in the adoption of student-centered learning methodologies. Classroom instruction has transitioned from conventional teacher-centered models

to more interactive learning environments that encompass collaborative conversations, problem-solving activities, project-based tasks, and active student engagement. Educators demonstrated more proficiency in classroom engagement, tailoring education to students' capabilities, and fostering critical thinking and autonomous learning. Continuous mentorship enhanced teachers' ability to implement formative assessment procedures, allowing for systematic monitoring of student progress, provision of constructive feedback, and modification of instructional methods based on assessment data.

Classroom observations corroborated these beliefs, revealing substantial enhancements in teachers' educational methodologies. Lesson plans were routinely developed and demonstrated clear connection with curriculum standards, learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessment processes. The classroom organization became more systematic through effective time management, purposeful learning activities, and enhanced classroom management methods that promoted student involvement. Furthermore, there was enhanced uniformity in the execution of the curriculum across classes, as educators were more adept at converting curricular mandates into cohesive teaching methodologies, while maintaining the adaptability to address contextual learning requirements. Collectively, these findings suggest that ongoing academic supervision serves not only as an evaluative mechanism but also as a developmental process aimed at enhancing teachers' pedagogical competence, instructional quality, and professional self-efficacy, thereby fostering the continuous advancement of teaching and learning.

## **5. Conclusions**

This study aimed to identify the leadership tactics employed by the principal to enhance the quality of teaching at SMA Negeri 1 Geureudong Pase, a public secondary school located in a rural region. This institution faces numerous constraints, including geographical remoteness, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient personnel resources. The results demonstrated that cohesive, context-sensitive leadership techniques aimed at organizational advancement, instructional enhancement, and stakeholder collaboration were employed to elevate educational quality.

The initial significant finding revealed that the principal employed a multifaceted leadership strategy, prioritizing strategic planning, instructional oversight, teacher professional development, collaborative decision-making, and community involvement. The principal not only exercised administrative authority but also cultivated a collective vision, strengthened organizational commitment, facilitated collaborative problem-solving, and fostered ongoing professional development among teachers. Such leadership methods cultivated an organizational culture that promotes creativity, shared ownership, and ongoing school improvement, despite the constraints commonly associated with rural educational institutions.

The second finding revealed that the contextual elements influencing the adoption of various leadership methods, whether facilitating or constraining, were integral to the process. Teacher dedication, collaborative collegiality, backing from the school committee, and constructive interactions with parents and local communities were crucial enabling characteristics that facilitated the execution of school reform initiatives. The enduring problems were geographical isolation, a shortage of competent educators, inadequate educational facilities, constrained financial resources, and restricted access to continuous professional development. The primary demonstration of adaptive leadership involved optimizing available resources, improving internal professional development systems, and establishing collaborative relationships that alleviated the impact of structural constraints.

Third, these cohesive leadership techniques were positively correlated with several facets of educational excellence. Improvements in instructional practices were evident due to systematic

academic supervision and mentoring, enhanced teacher professionalism through collaborative learning activities, increased organizational commitment among school personnel, improved student discipline and academic performance, and heightened stakeholder confidence in the school. The findings indicate that the quality of education in rural schools is influenced not only by the availability of physical resources but also by the ability of school leaders to foster organizational commitment, enhance professional capacity, and cultivate constructive relationships with the broader community. This study concludes that effective school leadership in rural environments is contextually grounded, flexible, and collaborative. The results indicate that enhancing educational quality requires a multifaceted leadership approach, incorporating transformational, instructional, distributed, and community-focused methods that address specific local educational contexts. The principal's strategic integration of these complementary leadership dimensions facilitated the establishment of organizational settings conducive to ongoing educational enhancement, despite considerable contextual constraints.

This study enhances the existing knowledge of educational leadership by providing empirical evidence from a rural Indonesian secondary school, a context that remains underrepresented in international educational leadership research. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the integration of several leadership styles into a cohesive framework aimed at enhancing educational quality in resource-constrained environments. The ramifications of these findings are substantial for policymakers and educational authorities, indicating the necessity for improved principal leadership development programs that emphasize adaptive leadership, instructional enhancement, collaborative governance, and community involvement, particularly in geographically disadvantaged regions.

This study provides substantial insights into principal leadership techniques in a rural secondary school; however, it is constrained by its examination of a singular situation. Future research should examine numerous rural schools across diverse geographical and socio-cultural contexts to further the understanding of contextual school leadership. Comparative and mixed-methods research examining the interaction effects of leadership practices and organizational factors on educational quality across various educational contexts will enhance the evidence base.

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