

# Leadership Strategy of the School Principal in Improving the Quality of Education in Remote Areas

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the leadership strategy of the school principal in improving the quality of education in remote areas, specifically at SMKN 12 Sarolangun. Remote areas often face various challenges in accessing quality education, such as limited infrastructure, minimal government support, and low community participation in education. Therefore, the role of the school principal is crucial in creating an environment that supports the improvement of education quality in these areas. This research employs a qualitative approach, with data collection techniques including in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Participants in this study include the school principal, teachers, and other relevant stakeholders involved in the educational process at SMKN 12 Sarolangun. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques to identify and describe the various leadership strategies implemented by the principal in addressing the existing challenges and efforts to enhance the quality of education. The results show that the principal at SMKN 12 Sarolangun applies several leadership strategies, including human resource development, improving the quality of teaching and learning, and utilizing technology and networking with external parties. In addition, the principal is also active in building partnerships with the community and related agencies to support educational activities at the school. This research is expected to make a significant contribution to the development of educational leadership strategies in remote areas and serve as a reference for other school principals in efforts to improve education quality in similar conditions.

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## Introduction

The issues in the education sector are a shared responsibility that must be addressed by all parties, as education is a crucial means to shape the future generations who will determine the

nation's progress and intelligence, both now and in the future. Every citizen has the right to access quality education. This is in line with the Republic of Indonesia's Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, Article 5, which states that every citizen is entitled to quality education. According to Khodijah and Haq (2021), quality education is a strategic investment to support the nation's advancement and enhance the intellectual life by developing students' potential so that they become competent and capable of competing.

Each region has diverse needs, depending on its demographic, economic, political, socio-cultural, and geographical conditions. This also applies to remote and less developed areas in Indonesia compared to other regions at the national level, particularly the 3T areas (lagging, front-line, and outermost). Low accessibility to schools is often a problem in remote areas. This can lead to high student absenteeism and difficulties in recruiting and retaining quality teachers. A study in Indonesia by Prasetyo and Kifla (2023) has shown that geographical factors significantly affect student participation in education.

In Indonesia, similar cases occur in the border region of Sarolangun District, Jambi Province, specifically at SMKN 12 Sarolangun. SMK Negeri 12 Sarolangun is located on Jalan Bukit Bulan, Meribung Village, Limun Subdistrict, Sarolangun District, Jambi Province. Its geographical coordinates are 2°36'24.62" S and 102°28'4.74" E. This location is situated within Sarolangun District, which covers a vast area with diverse topography, consisting of lowlands and mountains. Administratively, Sarolangun District borders Batanghari District to the north, Musi Banyuasin District to the east, and Merangin District to the west. SMKN 12 Sarolangun was established in 2013 and is under the authority of the Jambi Provincial Education Office. The school is accredited with a B rating; however, poor transportation access, electricity, and internet connectivity make it difficult to achieve consistent educational quality.

Educational inequality in Indonesia is caused by several fundamental factors. First, the limited access to and inadequate educational infrastructure. Second, the challenging geographical conditions, such as the vast distances between islands and access to schools that can often only be reached by sea routes. Third, social and cultural barriers, including the perception in some communities that education is not a priority. Fourth, the shortage of educators, where a single teacher often has to teach multiple subjects due to the insufficient number of teachers at a school. Fifth, the low quality of teachers, exacerbated by the tendency of teachers to choose their teaching locations. Most teachers prefer to teach in urban areas, while only a few are willing to teach in remote regions. As a result, Maulido et al. (2024) highlight that quality teachers are more often

found in larger cities.

Among the important factors for creating an effective school environment, the presence of leadership plays a crucial role. The school principal is strategically responsible for establishing the vision and goals for the school, developing the curriculum, and ensuring that students achieve good learning outcomes. The principal also has the ability to inspire and motivate both teachers and students to achieve the best results. The principal has the power to foster a positive school culture that supports innovation and encourages collaboration among all parties in the school.

In Indonesia, the role of the school principal is crucial in efforts to improve the quality of education, especially in remote areas that often face various challenges related to infrastructure and limited resources. Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan (2020) states that the principal must be able to manage and lead effectively to overcome these obstacles and ensure that education continues to run smoothly. High-quality education is a crucial foundation for achieving the development of quality human resources. In remote areas, Juharyanto et al. (2019) point out that the school principal requires effective leadership strategies to overcome limitations in facilities, low access to technology, and the shortage of competent teaching staff.

The success of a school principal in leading an educational institution in remote areas often determines the quality of education received by students. An effective principal in learning leadership will focus on improving students' academic performance, developing teachers' professional skills, and creating a conducive learning environment. Aini et al. (2024) explain that this role becomes even more crucial in the face of globalization, technological advancements, and the increasing societal demands for higher education quality. Mahfud (2020) states that the school principal is expected to implement effective leadership, which involves developing and cultivating a leadership style focused on the optimal management of the school. Furthermore, Mukhlisin (2019) notes that the school principal needs to design effective programs and strategies to improve school quality, achieve outstanding academic performance, and produce graduates with competencies at a global level.

Dianto et al. (2023) state that the programs and strategies designed by the school principal are expected to create and introduce new innovations aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. The leadership strategy of the school principal plays a key role in creating an effective and efficient school organizational climate to achieve educational goals. The success of a school largely depends on the principal's strategy to enhance quality through outstanding programs. Kurniawati et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of the principal's leadership strategy in this regard.

In the context of Indonesia, Juharyanto et al. (2023) show that a positive school climate and effective leadership contribute to the improvement of educational quality, especially in remote areas. School principals in remote areas often face limitations in educational resources, including physical facilities, books, and technology. Research by Liu (2015) shows that a lack of resources can hinder the teaching and learning process and affect students' motivation. Kurniady et al. (2022) note that a school principal who is able to create a supportive school climate and collaborate with teachers can improve their performance and job satisfaction. Therefore, it is important for the school principal to develop adaptive leadership skills that are responsive to the needs of both teachers and students.

The leadership of school principals in remote areas demands the ability to create adaptive and innovative policies. Sabariah (2021) points out that they need to maximize the use of available resources to support the teaching and learning process, even in conditions of limited availability. In addition, Sangaji and Triono (2023) explain that this leadership includes the ability to build networks with local governments, communities, and other stakeholders who have an interest in education. This is done to mobilize support and funding for educational needs in less accessible areas.

The challenges in developing education in remote areas also include difficulties in accessibility and the lack of supporting facilities. According to Wardaya et al. (2022), many remote areas in Indonesia still lack adequate internet access, which is becoming increasingly important for digital learning methods. In such conditions, Budiyo (2020) suggests that school principals are required to innovate in the learning process, such as using locally sourced teaching materials that are easily accessible to students in the area.

Several previous studies have shown that school principals who act as learning leaders have a significant impact on improving school quality. For example, a study by Leithwood et al. (2019) found that school leadership focused on learning directly contributes to the improvement of students' academic performance. Meanwhile, research by Bush (2018) shows that school principals who are effective in learning leadership are able to create a conducive learning environment, which in turn enhances student motivation and achievement.

Based on the explanations, there is a need for research on the strategies employed by school principals in remote areas to improve the quality of education. Therefore, the researcher deems it necessary to conduct a study on the leadership strategies of the school principal, taking a case study at SMK Negeri 12 Sarolangun, Jambi. It is hoped that by studying the strategies, characteristics, and

leadership styles of the principal at SMK Negeri 12 Sarolangun, Jambi, it will serve as a reference for developing the school to become better.

## Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand the leadership strategies of school principals in improving the quality of education at vocational schools located in remote areas. According to Suyitno (2021), this approach was chosen because it provides space for the researcher to explore information in depth regarding the patterns, strategies, and challenges faced by school principals in an educational environment with limited access and facilities. The focus of this research is on the leadership strategies implemented, the challenges faced, and the impact of these strategies on the quality of education at the vocational school.

### 1. *Research Subjects*

The subjects of this study are the principals of vocational schools located in remote areas, particularly those with at least five years of experience in leading the school. Additional informants include teachers, school staff, and the school committee, who can provide perspectives on the effectiveness of the leadership implemented.

### 2. *Data Collection*

Data collection is carried out through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document studies. In-depth interviews are conducted with the school principal to explore the leadership strategies implemented and the motivations behind the selection of these strategies. As noted by Juniarti et al. (2020), participatory observation is done to observe the interactions between the principal and teachers, as well as leadership practices in real school situations. Document studies include the analysis of school performance reports, the principal's work programs, and records of internal meetings related to the improvement of education quality.

### 3. *Data Analysis*

Data is analyzed using thematic analysis, which includes initial coding, categorization, and identification of key themes. Each interview and observational data is categorized based on themes that reflect leadership strategies and the principal's role in improving educational quality. Subsequently, based on the method by Huberman and Miles (2002), the data is analyzed to identify patterns and common themes that indicate the effectiveness of leadership strategies in remote areas.

#### 4. Data Validity Test

Data validity is ensured through source triangulation and method triangulation to confirm the validity and reliability of the data. Source triangulation involves gathering data from various informants, while method triangulation compares results from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Additionally, as recommended by Creswell (2018), member checking is conducted by confirming the interview results with informants to avoid interpretative bias.

#### 5. Research Procedures

This study is conducted in several stages, as follows:

- **Preparation:** This includes identifying the research location and preparing the research instruments.
- **Data Collection:** Data is collected through interviews, observations, and document studies according to the schedule agreed upon with the subjects.
- **Data Analysis:** Data analysis is conducted continuously throughout the data collection process to identify patterns and key themes.
- **Reporting:** The research findings are compiled into a report that includes the main findings and implications for the development of leadership strategies at SMK Negeri 12 Sarolangun.

### Result and Discussion

Principals in remote areas often face major challenges related to limited educational resources, whether in the form of physical facilities such as inadequate classrooms, limited teaching aids or access to textbooks and information technology needed to support effective teaching and learning. Limited infrastructure such as inadequate classrooms, lack of supporting facilities such as laboratories, libraries and technology devices, can hinder students' learning experience. Without adequate facilities, teaching and learning activities are limited, and students struggle to access more diverse learning materials. In addition, infrastructure limitations can also affect students' comfort and concentration, which in turn can affect their ability to understand the material and actively participate in the learning process. Another challenge is the shortage of teaching staff which causes a heavy workload on teachers, resulting in suboptimal teaching quality. If the number of teachers is inadequate, a larger teaching load can reduce the individualized attention that can be given to students, especially for those who need deeper guidance or have learning difficulties. In addition, a shortage of teachers who are trained or competent in a particular area can also hinder students' understanding of the material being taught. A shortage of teachers also often leads to more forced

and less effective teaching, and reduces opportunities for students to engage in deeper and more creative learning.

This research shows that these shortcomings not only hinder the smooth running of learning activities, but also potentially reduce students' motivation to learn. Students in resource-limited environments tend to feel that they are not getting enough attention or facilities, which in turn can affect their overall learning outcomes.

Low accessibility to schools is often a problem in remote areas. This can lead to high student absenteeism and difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. A study in Indonesia by Prasetyo and Kifla (2023) indicates that geographical factors significantly influence student participation in education.

Efforts to develop the school and continuously improve teacher performance or productivity are key characteristics of a dedicated school principal. An effective principal must be able to provide guidance and support to teachers, consistently motivate them, and build harmonious relationships between leaders and staff. This creates a strong work spirit, which ultimately leads to excellent performance and significant improvements in work quality.

### **Strategies of School Principals in Remote Areas**

The principal of SMKN 12 Sarolangun, which is located in a remote area, employs several effective strategies to improve the quality of education, including:

1. Building Partnerships
2. Adopting Innovative Teaching Methods
3. Providing Training and Professional Development for Teachers
4. Creating a Positive and Inclusive School Climate

Based on an interview with the principal, the quality improvement strategy at SMKN 12 Sarolangun involves collaboration among all school members, including the school committee, teachers, and the community, to enhance the quality of teaching. The principal stated that the school development process begins at the start of each new academic year and continues at the beginning of each semester. Teachers are actively involved in the school development planning process, both in terms of curriculum activities and teaching methods related to school progress. Meanwhile, according to an interview with the school committee, the principal regularly discusses and seeks suggestions for the school development planning. The committee plays an active role by providing constructive feedback and acknowledges that their involvement is crucial to the success of the school development plan.

The principal's strategy in improving the quality of education at SMKN 12 Sarolangun is in line with the findings of research conducted by Saleem et al. (2020), which states that school principals can build partnerships with the local community to increase support for the school. This may include collaboration with non-governmental organizations, government agencies, and local businesses to secure additional resources.

Based on the strategies mentioned to improve the quality of education at SMKN 12 Sarolangun, this is reflected in the school's success in securing school development funding through the DAK (Dana Alokasi Khusus) in 2023. This funding was used to build new school facilities, including the UKS (Health Unit Room), BK (Guidance and Counseling Room), and OSIS (Student Organization Room), complete with all necessary facilities. The principal's ability to negotiate with the industry also resulted in a business partnership with PT. MUMTAS for the distribution of cassava as a raw material for tapioca flour production. This achievement was made possible by the principal's skill in implementing effective strategies with the industry, government, and the Directorate of Vocational Schools (Direktorat SMK).

Adopting innovative teaching methods, such as project-based learning or the use of simple technologies, can help increase student engagement and improve the quality of learning. Research by Chen et al. (2017) shows that more creative approaches can enhance student motivation. Based on interviews with the teachers and the principal of SMKN 12 Sarolangun, the principal strives to improve the quality of teaching by ensuring that each topic is taught by a teacher who is competent in the subject area. The teachers confirmed that they teach in line with their professional backgrounds. Additionally, the principal actively encourages teacher development by providing opportunities to attend training and other programs, while also granting teachers more autonomy in managing the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Digital learning tools are also an effective complement for schools with limited resource environments. Azhariadi et al. (2019) state that an ICT-based learning process allows students to explore, be creative, adjust to the times, and of course add insight and knowledge. This is in line with what teachers do at SMKN 12 Sarolangun, namely technological learning media in the form of learning videos using LCD (infocus). The teaching and learning process that uses learning media will be able to facilitate the teaching and learning process, besides that it makes the teaching and learning process more effective and efficient. The use of media, especially IT-based media, can not only help students in learning but also add knowledge to students about how to use technology in learning. This allows students to keep up with the times.

The principal also involves teachers in various training and seminars to enhance their qualifications, aiming to address the challenges that arise in the implementation of school quality improvement programs at SMKN 12 Sarolangun. This aligns with the findings of the study by Juharyanto et al. (2023), which states that principals must make efforts to provide training and professional development for teachers, even with limited resources. This can be achieved through distance learning programs or collaboration with higher education institutions. This is also supported by the Jambi Provincial Government through the Jambi Provincial Education Office, which provides training opportunities for teachers and prioritizes teachers from remote schools.

The findings of this study show that the principal's leadership strategy involves the active participation of teachers in decision-making so that teachers feel valued. Teachers in schools are closer to the field conditions and have a better understanding of the challenges faced by students and schools. Thus, with a democratic principal leadership style, teachers are given space to speak and participate in planning and evaluation so that the resulting policies are better.

#### **Barriers in the Implementation of School Development at SMKN 12 Sarolangun**

School principals in remote areas often lack access to adequate training and professional development programs for teachers. Ajigoena and Hisbullah (2022) point out that this can result in low-quality teaching and learning in the classroom. This issue is also faced by the principal of SMKN 12 Sarolangun. According to an interview with the principal, one of the challenges encountered in the implementation of school development is the difficulty in managing time for these activities. In addition, the principal also faces challenges in effectively managing all school development activities.

Creating a positive and inclusive school climate can improve teacher and student motivation and performance. Kurniady et al. (2022) suggest that principals should focus on developing good relationships between all stakeholders in the school. Based on the interview with the principal, there are several barriers that hinder strong collaboration between the school and local stakeholders, including not all local stakeholders having a deep understanding of the educational challenges faced by the school. For example, parents or community members may not fully understand the importance of the curriculum implemented at school or how they can support learning at home. This lack of understanding may limit the level of support they provide to the school. Parental and community involvement in education is often low in remote areas. Liu and Hallinger (2018) emphasize that the school principal must make efforts to build strong relationships with the community to increase support for education.

Based on interviews with teachers, one of the obstacles in teaching is that some students have difficulty assimilating the lesson material. For students who have not fully understood the material, the teacher tries to repeat the explanation so that they can follow the lesson better. Teachers realize that with limited internet access, learning media cannot be used optimally. In addition, not all students can absorb the material in the same way. If there are problems with students, teachers immediately report them to the principal, who then provides practical solutions that can be applied by teachers to overcome these obstacles. This is also supported by the Jambi Provincial Government, which gives leeway for remote area schools to choose the appropriate curriculum to be applied to the conditions of each school.

Inequality in access to education in Indonesia is a complex problem that is influenced by various factors, including geography, economics and government policies. To overcome this problem, cooperation is needed between the government, the community and educational institutions in creating an inclusive and equitable education system. Ekosiswoyo (2007) states that efforts to improve quality and productivity in any field cannot be separated from the management system developed, so leadership factors play an important and decisive role. Based on the research results, principals' leadership strategies in remote areas should respond to local challenges and align limited resources with larger educational goals. Effective leadership in remote areas will involve collaboration between schools, teachers, parents and communities to create a supportive environment for quality education.

The leadership strategies implemented in remote areas have the potential to endure in the long term if they are applied with flexibility and adjustment to changing situations. In addition, many of the strategies, such as transformational leadership, teacher professional development, community partnerships and the application of technology, can be adapted by other schools in different regions. However, long-term success depends largely on the involvement of all stakeholders, the sustainability of resource support and the ability of principals to continuously innovate and adapt to challenges.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the problems, research objectives, research results and discussions that have been presented, it can be concluded that the leadership styles applied by school principals are democratic and situational leadership styles. Principals in remote areas play a very important role in improving the quality of education despite facing various challenges. By applying effective leadership

strategies and adapting to the local context, principals can create a better learning environment for students. Further research is needed to test the effectiveness of different leadership training programs for principals in remote areas. The principal of SMKN 12 Sarolangun, which is a remote area, has some effective strategies that he uses in improving the quality of education, namely building partnerships, adopting innovative teaching methods, providing training and professional development for teachers and creating a positive and inclusive school climate. Further research could explore leadership resilience in crisis situations, such as natural disasters or budget constraints.

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