

Research Article

Instructional Leadership of Principals in Building Effective Schools at Ratu Safiatuddin Cluster II Primary Schools: A Qualitative Analysis Assisted by NVivo

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the instructional leadership practices of principals in building effective schools at Sekolah Dasar Gugus II Ratu Safiatuddin, Aceh Tamiang Regency. The research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews, observation, and document study. Data analysis was conducted thematically with the assistance of NVivo software to ensure depth and transparency. The results reveal three main instructional leadership practices: (1) continuous and feedback-based academic supervision, (2) teacher professional development through training and collaboration in Teacher Working Groups (KKG), and (3) the creation of a positive school culture characterized by open communication, appreciation, and discipline. Triangulation analysis using NVivo's project map feature shows a strong alignment between the perspectives of principals and teachers, confirming that these practices tangibly shape a safe, comfortable, and conducive learning climate. The main obstacle faced is the high administrative burden, which limits time for instructional functions. The study concludes that structured and learning-oriented instructional leadership is a key factor in building primary school effectiveness and recommends the need for supportive policies to strengthen the instructional role of principals amid administrative challenges.

Keywords: Instructional Leadership; Effective School; Academic Supervision; School Culture; NVivo

1. INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of primary education remains a major global concern, particularly in ensuring school effectiveness as the core unit of educational implementation. OECD reports indicate that school leadership quality contributes significantly to improving student learning outcomes and teacher performance, especially at the primary education level, which forms the foundation of long-term learning (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2023). Similarly, UNESCO data emphasize that schools led by strong, learning-oriented leadership tend to demonstrate more conducive learning climates and more stable academic achievement compared to schools with weak leadership (UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO, 2023).

Within this context, instructional leadership has emerged as one of the most widely studied and empirically validated leadership approaches for enhancing school quality. Meta-analytical studies by Hallinger and Liu demonstrate that instructional leadership has a direct impact on teachers' instructional practices and an indirect effect on student learning outcomes (Hallinger & Liu, 2020; Hallinger et al., 2021). Other studies further indicate that principals who consistently practice instructional leadership are able to maintain a strong academic focus, enhance professional collaboration among teachers, and strengthen data-based evaluation cultures within schools (Robinson et al., 2022; Leithwood et al., 2023).

Effective primary schools are characterized by leadership that prioritizes learning, accompanied by high academic expectations and continuous monitoring of teaching and learning processes. International research shows that effective primary schools are typically led by principals who are actively involved in instructional supervision and teacher professional development (Day et al., 2021; Bush & Glover, 2022). These empirical findings affirm that school effectiveness is not solely determined by infrastructure availability, but is strongly influenced by principals' instructional leadership practices.

In Indonesia, instructional leadership at the primary school level has become increasingly relevant alongside educational quality improvement initiatives and learning transformation policies. National studies indicate that principals continue to

face challenges in balancing administrative responsibilities and instructional roles, resulting in suboptimal implementation of learning leadership functions (Suhardiman et al., 2021; Prasojo & Yuliana, 2022). Other research highlights that time constraints and administrative workload are dominant factors limiting principals' ability to conduct sustained academic supervision (Suryadi et al., 2023; Wahyudi & Hidayat, 2024).

These conditions are also evident in Ratu Safiatuddin Cluster II Primary Schools in Aceh Tamiang Regency. Preliminary observations conducted by the researchers at two schools in the cluster revealed that while principals have attempted to implement instructional leadership, their efforts remain constrained by limited time for instructional supervision and teacher mentoring. This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that principals in regional contexts often experience high administrative pressure, which restricts their role as instructional leaders (Rahman et al., 2021; Fitriah et al., 2022).

Despite the growing body of research on instructional leadership, studies that specifically examine principals' instructional leadership practices in building effective schools within primary school clusters, particularly in Aceh Tamiang Regency, remain limited. Moreover, the use of qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo to systematically explore instructional leadership practices is still relatively rare. NVivo-assisted analysis allows for more comprehensive and transparent identification of themes, patterns, and data relationships in qualitative research (Knaflic et al., 2021; Woolf & Silver, 2023). Accordingly, this study aims to describe the instructional leadership practices of principals in building effective schools at Ratu Safiatuddin Cluster II Primary Schools in Aceh Tamiang Regency using NVivo-assisted qualitative analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of leadership practices and implementation challenges.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to gain an in-depth understanding of principals' instructional leadership practices in building effective primary schools. This approach was selected because it allows for the exploration of meanings, processes, and the dynamics of instructional leadership within the natural context of schools (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Miles et al., 2020). The study was conducted at Ratu Safiatuddin Cluster II Primary Schools in Aceh Tamiang Regency. The research participants consisted of school principals and teachers who were selected using purposive sampling. This sampling technique was applied to ensure that participants had direct involvement in teaching and school management processes. The selection of informants was based on the relevance of their professional experience and the depth of information they could provide in relation to the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2020; Guest et al., 2023). Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore instructional leadership practices and strategies implemented by school principals. Observations were used to examine the enactment of instructional leadership within classroom and school settings, while document analysis was carried out to strengthen empirical findings using relevant school documents such as work programs, supervision records, and meeting reports (Tracy, 2020; Yin, 2023). The focus of the interview aspects and question categories is summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Interview Aspects and Question Categories

No.	Interview Aspect	Question Category
1	Building Effective Schools	Creating a school environment that supports high-quality learning
2	Enhancing School Community Motivation	Active participation of school members in school activities
3	Creating a School Climate	A safe and comfortable physical and psychological environment

Data analysis was conducted thematically with the assistance of NVivo software. All data were transcribed, organized, and coded through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding stages to generate major themes representing principals' instructional leadership practices in building effective schools. The use of NVivo facilitated systematic data management and enhanced the transparency and rigor of the qualitative analysis process (Knaflic et al., 2021; Woolf & Silver, 2023).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Principals' Instructional Leadership Practices in Building Effective Schools

This section presents the research findings on principals' instructional leadership practices in building effective schools at Ratu Safiatuddin Cluster II Primary Schools. The findings are derived from NVivo-assisted qualitative data analysis obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The analysis aimed to identify patterns, categories, and major themes that represent how principals enact instructional leadership within instructional and school management contexts. An overview of the findings is illustrated in **Figure 1**.



Figure 1. Word cloud of instructional leadership themes

The word cloud visualization of principals' instructional leadership in building effective schools highlights several dominant terms, including supervision, competence, training, socialization, culture, positive, professional, appreciation, discipline, and responsibility. The prominence of these terms indicates that instructional leadership practices in both schools are strongly associated with teacher development and the strengthening of academic culture. Academic supervision emerged as the most salient element of instructional leadership practice. Principals actively conducted instructional monitoring and scheduled academic supervision, accompanied by feedback provided to teachers to ensure alignment between curriculum implementation, lesson planning, and students' learning needs. This practice is reflected in the following statement by one of the principals:

"Saya memastikan seluruh guru memahami dokumen kurikulum melalui rapat kerja sekolah dan sosialisasi. Selanjutnya saya melakukan monitoring serta supervisi secara berkala untuk memastikan implementasi kurikulum sesuai dengan rencana, dan menyesuaikannya dengan kebutuhan siswa serta kondisi sekolah." (KS.1)

"I ensure that all teachers understand the curriculum documents through school work meetings and socialization activities. Furthermore, I conduct regular monitoring and supervision to ensure that curriculum implementation aligns with the planned objectives and is adjusted to students' needs and school conditions." (Principal 1)

The term competence indicates that principals perceive teacher competence as a key factor in building effective schools. In this context, competence is not limited to mastery of subject matter but also includes pedagogical skills, classroom management, and the ability to adapt to curriculum demands and students' needs. This finding is consistent with interview and observation data showing that principals consistently emphasize teacher capacity building as an integral part of instructional leadership. One principal stated:

"Saya mengadakan program pelatihan, workshop, dan kegiatan KKG internal agar guru selalu terupdate dengan perkembangan kurikulum dan metode pembelajaran. Selain itu, saya memberi kesempatan guru mengikuti seminar maupun diklat di luar sekolah agar wawasan mereka semakin berkembang." (KS.1)

"I organize training programs, workshops, and internal Teacher Working Group activities to ensure that teachers remain updated on curriculum developments and instructional methods. In addition, I provide opportunities for teachers to participate in external seminars and professional training to broaden their perspectives." (Principal 1)

The words culture, positive, mutual, and appreciation reflect principals' efforts to build a conducive school culture. This aligns with principals' emphasis on role modeling, creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere, and fostering values such as cooperation and mutual respect. One principal explained:

"Saya menciptakan lingkungan pembelajaran yang kondusif dengan menjaga kebersihan, kerapian, dan keamanan sekolah serta menyediakan sarana prasarana yang memadai. Selain itu, saya mendorong terciptanya budaya positif di kelas dan sekolah agar siswa merasa nyaman, aman, dan termotivasi untuk belajar."

"I create a conducive learning environment by maintaining school cleanliness, orderliness, and safety, as well as providing adequate facilities and infrastructure. In addition, I encourage the development of a positive culture in classrooms and throughout the school so that students feel comfortable, safe, and motivated to learn."

Furthermore, the terms discipline and responsibility indicate that school rules and character formation are also integral components of instructional leadership. Principals not only strengthen technical aspects of instruction but also instill professional values through example and habituation. As one principal stated:

“Saya menegakkan tata tertib dengan konsisten, memberi teladan langsung, serta menerapkan reward and punishment yang adil. Selain itu, saya melakukan pembinaan rutin dan menanamkan kesadaran bahwa disiplin adalah kunci keberhasilan bersama.”

“I consistently enforce school rules, provide direct role modeling, and apply fair reward and punishment systems. In addition, I conduct regular coaching and instill awareness that discipline is the key to collective success.”

This visualization reinforces the findings from the interviews and observations, indicating that both principals actively, systematically, and purposefully enact their instructional leadership roles with a strong orientation toward improving the quality of teaching and learning. These findings are further supported by NVivo coding results derived from interviews with 12 teachers across two schools, as illustrated in [Figure 2](#).



Figure 2. Word cloud of teachers' perspectives on instructional leadership

The word cloud analysis derived from the coding of principals' and teachers' data demonstrates a strong and mutually reinforcing thematic connection. In the principals' instructional leadership word cloud, dominant terms such as supervision, competence, training, socialization, positive culture, professionalism, appreciation, discipline, and responsibility reflect principals' efforts to manage the instructional process through systematic monitoring, competency development, and the creation of a conducive learning environment. In comparison, the word cloud representing teachers' perceptions highlights prominent terms including creating, sense, safe, comfortable, culture, positive, appreciated, heard, open, relationship, discipline, and conducive. The dominance of these terms indicates that teachers experience the direct impact of principals' instructional leadership practices, particularly in fostering a school climate that is perceived as safe, comfortable, and productive. These findings suggest a high degree of alignment between principals' intended instructional leadership strategies and teachers' lived experiences within the school context, reinforcing the role of instructional leadership in shaping a positive and effective learning environment.

3.2 NVivo-Based Triangulation of Findings

Further data analysis was conducted using the project map feature in NVivo 15 to examine the relationships among data sources and to ensure the consistency of the research findings. The resulting project map reveals a clear interconnection among four primary data sources: principals' interviews, teachers' interviews, observational data, and documentation in the form of photographs from the beginning-of-year school meetings. These four data sources complement and reinforce one another in illustrating the theme of instructional leadership in building effective schools. This triangulated relationship is illustrated in [Figure 3](#).

lingkungan yang ramah dan inklusif bagi seluruh warga sekolah, sehingga tercipta rasa nyaman dan tidak takut.” (Guru 2 SD Paya Bedi).

“Our principal’s leadership is able to create a comprehensive sense of safety and comfort within the school environment. This is because the principal consistently builds open communication and fosters a positive culture by providing appreciation, encouraging teachers to innovate, maintaining harmonious relationships, and managing available resources in collaboration with the surrounding community. As a result, a friendly and inclusive environment is created for all members of the school, allowing teachers to feel comfortable and free from fear.” (Teacher 2, Paya Bedi Primary School).

b) Communication and Appreciation in Strengthening School Social Relationships

In the principals’ word cloud, the terms appreciation, responsibility, and mutual appear with notable frequency. These terms are mirrored in the teachers’ word cloud through expressions such as appreciated, heard, open, and relationship. This alignment indicates that principals actively promote values of appreciation and open communication, which are genuinely experienced by teachers in their daily professional interactions. This serves as strong evidence that principals’ communication practices extend beyond rhetoric and are meaningfully implemented and acknowledged by teachers. As one teacher explained:

“Adapun seorang guru bisa menilai pemimpin yang terbuka dengan mengevaluasi tingkat komunikasi dukungan dan sumber daya yang diberikan, keterlibatan dalam pengembangan profesional guru, observasi melalui umpaman baik langsung sehingga dapat nyata kinerja kesejahteraan guru.” (Guru 4 Paya Bedi)

“A teacher can assess an open leader by evaluating the level of communication, support, and resources provided, the leader’s involvement in teachers’ professional development, and direct observational feedback, all of which contribute tangibly to teachers’ performance and well-being.” (Teacher 4, Paya Bedi Primary School).

c) Discipline and Consistency in Supporting a Conducive School Climate

The term discipline in the principals’ word cloud is directly associated with terms such as discipline, conducive, and rules in the teachers’ word cloud. This relationship demonstrates consistency between principals’ policies and teachers’ perceptions. Teachers perceive that the enforcement of discipline by principals contributes to school order and structure, thereby creating a more stable and effective learning environment. Principals are perceived as fulfilling their roles as both managers and leaders by remaining actively involved in supervision and evaluation, as well as in character-building indicators such as fostering students’ moral behavior, discipline, and responsibility.

d) A Safe and Comfortable School Environment as an Integrative Outcome of Instructional Leadership

Both word clouds prominently feature the term positive, indicating that principals’ efforts in organizing school facilities, fostering an academic culture, and conducting continuous guidance significantly influence the quality of the school climate. Teachers perceive that a sense of safety and comfort does not emerge spontaneously, but rather results from deliberate instructional leadership strategies encompassing supervision, professional development, communication, and cultural reinforcement.

“Beliau sebagai pemimpin dapat menciptakan budaya sekolah yang positif, memberikan bimbingan dan motivasi kepada seluruh warga sekolah.”

“As a leader, the principal is able to create a positive school culture and provide guidance and motivation to all members of the school community.”

The triangulation of data using the NVivo project map feature demonstrates a high level of consistency across data sources. Principals’ statements regarding supervision, professional development, and school culture strengthening align closely with teachers’ perceptions and are further supported by observational findings and school documentation. Observations reveal the presence of routine academic supervision, open communication practices, and a well-organized, conducive school environment. Documentation of school activities, such as beginning-of-year meetings and teacher development programs, further strengthens the validity of the research findings. The convergence of these data sources confirms that principals’ instructional leadership is not merely normative, but is concretely implemented and meaningfully experienced by teachers in fostering a safe, comfortable, and effective school climate.

3.3 Discussion

The NVivo-assisted visualizations, including word clouds and project maps, do not merely present the frequency of emerging terms but also reveal underlying patterns of meaning that reflect the dynamics of principals’ instructional leadership within the primary school context of Aceh Tamiang. The prominence of terms such as supervision, training, positive culture, discipline, and appreciation indicates a strong conceptual alignment with the three core domains of instructional leadership

proposed by Hallinger (2020), namely defining school goals, managing the instructional program, and developing a positive academic climate. However, the findings of this study also extend this framework by demonstrating how these domains are enacted in an integrated and relational manner within everyday school practices.

The project map analysis highlights a strong and mutually reinforcing relationship between academic supervision and the creation of a conducive school climate. This finding suggests that supervision in the studied schools functions primarily as a formative and developmental process rather than as a mechanism of control. Such supervision contributes directly to teachers' sense of safety and comfort, which in turn supports instructional confidence and professional engagement. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary perspectives on instructional leadership that emphasize supervision as a learning-oriented process grounded in feedback, reflection, and collegial dialogue (Hallinger & Liu, 2020; Robinson et al., 2022). In the Indonesian context, this finding resonates with the instructional leadership models articulated by Mulyasa (2021) and Prasojo and Yuliana (2022), which stress the importance of collaborative and reflective supervision as a means of enhancing teacher professionalism. Furthermore, the observed linkage between teacher professional development and positive school culture underscores the dual function of professional learning activities. Training programs, workshops, and Teacher Working Group activities do not merely enhance teachers' technical competencies, but also serve as institutional mechanisms for cultivating a shared learning culture. This pattern reflects the characteristics of a learning organization, in which continuous professional development is embedded within collective norms and values rather than treated as an isolated intervention. This finding strengthens the argument advanced by Wahyudi and Hidayat (2024) that effective principals in Indonesia are those who are able to integrate their roles as instructional leaders and facilitators of teachers' long-term professional growth.

The strong presence of terms such as appreciation and open communication in the teachers' word cloud highlights the affective and relational dimensions of instructional leadership. These dimensions reflect a value-based instructional leadership approach, in which principals intentionally cultivate trust through recognition, empathy, and inclusive communication. Such an approach supports the development of a trust climate that mediates the successful implementation of instructional improvement initiatives. This aligns with the humanistic leadership perspective proposed by Daryanto and Suparno (2023), which emphasizes the balance between cognitive and emotional aspects of leadership in managing teaching and learning processes. International studies also suggest that trust and relational leadership are critical conditions for sustaining instructional improvement, particularly in contexts characterized by change and reform (Leithwood et al., 2023). Conceptually, the findings indicate that instructional leadership practices among principals in Ratu Safiatuddin Cluster II have evolved toward a more transformative and learning-centered orientation. Principals are not confined to administrative and supervisory functions but actively facilitate innovation, collaboration, and professional reflection among teachers. This evolution reflects a broader paradigm shift from managerial leadership toward learning-centered leadership, as promoted in the Merdeka Belajar policy framework (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). Such a shift is essential for enabling schools to respond adaptively to ongoing educational reforms and increasing expectations for instructional quality.

At the same time, the findings reveal a persistent structural tension related to administrative workload. Although principals demonstrate strong instructional leadership practices, the demands of administrative tasks continue to constrain the time and energy available for instructional engagement. This tension reflects a broader policy-practice gap, in which expectations for instructional leadership are not always matched by supportive organizational structures. Previous studies have similarly identified administrative burden as a significant barrier to effective instructional leadership in primary schools (Suryadi et al., 2023; Wahyudi & Hidayat, 2024). Addressing this issue requires systemic policy support, including clearer role delineation, strengthened administrative assistance, and accountability frameworks that prioritize instructional improvement over procedural compliance.

Methodologically, the use of NVivo enhanced the transparency and rigor of the qualitative analysis by enabling systematic coding, visualization of thematic relationships, and data triangulation. Nevertheless, NVivo functions as an analytic support tool rather than a determinant of meaning. The interpretation of word frequencies and node connections must be grounded in contextual understanding and supported by rich qualitative evidence, including interview excerpts, observations, and documentation. As emphasized by Woolf and Silver (2023), qualitative analysis software should support, rather than replace, researchers' analytical judgment and reflexivity. Overall, the findings confirm that instructional leadership in Aceh Tamiang has internalized three key principles of effective leadership within the Indonesian context: learning-oriented supervision, sustained professional development, and a values-driven school culture. These principles interact dynamically to shape a school environment that is safe, collaborative, and conducive to continuous improvement. While the findings are context-specific, they contribute to the broader literature by illustrating how instructional leadership operates in clustered primary school settings and by highlighting the importance of aligning leadership practices with supportive policy and organizational conditions.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that principals' instructional leadership at Ratu Safiatuddin Cluster II Primary Schools is enacted through three core practices: regular and feedback-oriented academic supervision, teacher professional development through training and collaborative forums, and the development of a positive school culture grounded in open

communication, discipline, and appreciation. NVivo-assisted qualitative analysis demonstrates a strong consistency between principals' statements and teachers' perceptions, confirming that these leadership practices are not merely normative but are directly experienced in creating a learning climate that is safe, comfortable, and conducive to instructional improvement. Despite persistent challenges related to administrative workload and limited time, which are consistent with previous findings in the Indonesian educational context, principals were able to integrate their instructional leadership roles effectively. These findings reinforce existing evidence that instructional leadership focused on learning processes, teacher development, and school climate constitutes a key determinant of effective primary schools. From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for systemic support to strengthen principals' instructional leadership capacity. Educational authorities should reconsider the distribution of principals' administrative responsibilities by providing adequate administrative assistance, clarifying role expectations, and establishing accountability frameworks that prioritize instructional quality over procedural compliance. Policies that allocate protected time for instructional supervision and professional mentoring are essential to ensure that principals can consistently perform their core instructional functions.

From a practical perspective, school principals are encouraged to adopt formative supervision models that emphasize feedback, reflection, and continuous improvement rather than evaluative control. The integration of professional development activities with collaborative learning forums, such as Teacher Working Groups, should be institutionalized to sustain a shared learning culture. In addition, principals should intentionally cultivate relational leadership practices through open communication, appreciation, and trust-building, as these affective dimensions play a critical role in mediating the effectiveness of instructional improvement initiatives. Overall, this study contributes empirical insight into instructional leadership practices within primary school clusters in Indonesia and underscores the importance of aligning leadership practices, organizational structures, and policy frameworks. Strengthening instructional leadership through coherent policy support and reflective school-level practices is essential for ensuring sustainable school effectiveness in the face of ongoing educational change.

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