

Innovative Leadership and Educational Quality Management: A Qualitative Study of Principal Practices in a Indonesian Primary School

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Abstract

Educational quality management in primary schools requires innovative leadership capable of navigating resource constraints while fostering continuous improvement. However, limited empirical evidence exists on how innovative leadership operationalizes quality management in rural Indonesian contexts. This study examined the innovative leadership strategies of the school principal in implementing educational quality management at SD Inpres Makapa A, Banggai Regency, Central Sulawesi. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, involving the principal and nine teachers as participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and Likert-scale questionnaires, then analyzed using an interactive model comprising data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing with triangulation to ensure trustworthiness. Findings revealed exceptionally high perception scores (95.6%) for innovative leadership across all indicators. The principal demonstrated transformational-innovative leadership through participatory decision-making, transparent communication, continuous professional development, technology integration, and moral-ethical guidance. Three interconnected mechanisms emerged: collaborative culture-building, adaptive practices, and psychological empowerment. Documentary evidence confirmed institutionalized quality management practices, though resource constraints moderated sustainability. Innovative leadership significantly enhances educational quality management effectiveness by leveraging social capital and intrinsic motivation rather than material resources alone. The study provides a replicable model for rural primary schools and emphasizes prioritizing leadership capacity-building alongside infrastructural investments for sustainable quality improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Education serves as the cornerstone of human capital development and stands as the most strategic investment a nation can make in preparing its citizens to thrive in an era characterized by rapid transformation and knowledge-based competition. Within this landscape, basic education functions as the critical foundation upon which lifelong learning and social progress are built (UNESCO, 2024), making the quality of management in primary schools one of the decisive determinants of national educational excellence. In Indonesia, improving primary education quality remains a persistent challenge, particularly in schools operating in regional or semi-rural contexts where limited resources, suboptimal management systems, and insufficient innovation in leadership

practices continue to hinder educational advancement. These challenges necessitate a fundamental rethinking of school leadership—one that emphasizes innovative, adaptive, and participatory approaches to drive holistic educational quality management.

Over the past decade, Indonesia's education policy agenda has increasingly prioritized the transformation of school governance to ensure accountability, inclusivity, and quality assurance at every level. The enactment of national standards such as Standar Nasional Pendidikan (SNP) and initiatives like Merdeka Belajar reflect the government's commitment to decentralizing educational management while empowering schools to innovate. However, despite these policy reforms, many primary schools—especially those outside major urban centers—continue to exhibit weaknesses in planning, implementation, and evaluation of quality programs. Studies by Nor & Suriansyah (2024) highlight that these weaknesses often stem from inadequate leadership capacity and the absence of a clear innovation culture within school management structures. This disconnect between policy intentions and institutional realities underscores the urgent need to examine how school principals can effectively translate reform mandates into concrete quality improvements through systematic continuous improvement processes (Anderson et al., 2024).

Leadership in this context transcends mere administrative function; it must be transformational and innovation-driven. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2024) emphasizes that educational leadership is the second most important factor explaining learning outcomes, with effective leaders at multiple levels being crucial for quality education. The principal's ability to mobilize teachers, optimize resources, and establish a culture of continuous improvement directly influences educational quality outcomes (Handayani et al., 2025). This urgency is particularly relevant in the post-pandemic period, as schools simultaneously navigate digital transformation, learning recovery, and new paradigms of community participation (Lamčja, 2022). Consequently, innovative leadership emerges as a necessary response—an approach characterized by creativity, risk-taking, openness to change, and collaborative engagement with all educational stakeholders. However, while numerous studies have examined educational leadership in Indonesia, a substantial gap persists in understanding how innovative leadership specifically contributes to the implementation of educational quality management at the primary school level.

Most existing research focuses on general leadership styles—transformational, instructional, or distributed—without addressing how innovation-driven leadership translates into concrete managerial practices that improve teaching, learning, and organizational culture. Furthermore, empirical studies on schools in non-metropolitan regions remain limited, creating a contextual knowledge gap regarding how local dynamics shape leadership effectiveness in resource-constrained settings. The literature indicates that innovation in school leadership encompasses multiple dimensions, including curriculum innovation, digital pedagogy adoption, teacher professional development, and stakeholder participation (N. Kurniawati et al., 2025). Recent studies demonstrate that digital innovations and transformational leadership require school leaders with an open innovation mindset who foster collaborative cultures of knowledge exchange (Fütterer et al., 2024). Yet these studies often remain descriptive, lacking a clear analytical framework linking innovative leadership behavior to the systematic processes of educational quality management—planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. As Fitriani et al. (2025) argue, while leadership integrating innovation with a servant-oriented mindset can enhance teacher motivation and parental involvement, the mechanisms through which this leadership style strengthens quality assurance systems remain underexplored.

International research underscores the pivotal role of principals as change agents who guide educational institutions through complex transformations. Fullan (2023) defines the innovative school leader as one who fosters collaborative professionalism, encourages experimentation, and transforms schools into learning organizations. Similarly, Leithwood and Louis (2020) emphasize that effective leaders cultivate collective efficacy by empowering teachers and distributing leadership responsibilities. In the Indonesian context, Nor and Suriansyah (2024) reveal that innovative leadership significantly correlates with teacher engagement and student learning outcomes,

suggesting that creativity and participative management enhance school resilience and adaptability. From an educational quality management perspective, continuous improvement frameworks emphasize systematic approaches involving stakeholder feedback, evidence-based decision-making, and accountability mechanisms (Bryk et al., 2015; Langley et al., 2009). However, the intersection between leadership innovation and quality management has not been sufficiently theorized in Indonesian basic education contexts, particularly regarding how principals operationalize innovation within existing quality frameworks while addressing resource constraints.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the innovative leadership of the principal at SD Inpres Makapa A in implementing educational quality management. The research aims to analyze the principal's innovative leadership strategies, identify supporting and inhibiting factors influencing leadership effectiveness, and evaluate the impact of innovative practices on teaching quality, teacher motivation, and the culture of continuous improvement. By focusing on a representative rural school, this study provides empirical insights into how innovation operates within resource-constrained settings where creativity and social capital often substitute for material resources. The findings contribute theoretically by refining the conceptual understanding of innovative leadership and linking it explicitly with the educational quality management paradigm. Practically, the study offers actionable strategies for school leaders, supervisors, and policymakers to enhance management effectiveness, strengthen teacher professionalism, and institutionalize innovation as a sustainable cultural norm. These insights are particularly timely given Indonesia's current policy transformation toward digital and adaptive schooling, providing valuable lessons for achieving the goals of Merdeka Belajar and the broader vision of Indonesia Emas 2045.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the principal's innovative leadership in implementing educational quality management at SD Inpres Makapa A, Banggai Regency, Central Sulawesi. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore naturally occurring phenomena within their real-life context and to interpret meaning through the lived experiences of participants. The qualitative descriptive design does not aim to test hypotheses or measure relationships between variables but rather to present a rich narrative of the phenomenon under study, specifically how the principal's innovative leadership practices shape and influence the processes of planning, implementing, and evaluating educational quality management.

The research was conducted at SD Inpres Makapa A, located in Makapa Village, Toili Barat District, Banggai Regency, Central Sulawesi, on October 10, 2025. The school was purposively selected as it is representative of public primary schools in rural Indonesian contexts that are currently striving to enhance educational quality through leadership innovation. Research participants comprised the principal as the primary informant and nine teachers representing various subject areas, including classroom teachers, Islamic and Hindu religion teachers, and a physical education teacher. All participants possessed formal teaching qualifications with a minimum of S.Pd degree and at least five years of experience in primary education, ensuring they had adequate experience with the school's organizational dynamics. Purposive sampling technique was applied to identify individuals who possessed rich and relevant information about the phenomenon being studied, with inclusion criteria focused on participants who had direct experience in the school's management, teaching, or evaluation processes (Mahlan et al., 2025).

Data were collected through three complementary methods to ensure triangulation and depth of understanding. The first method was semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face with the principal, teachers, and staff to gather detailed information about innovative leadership strategies, implementation challenges, and perceived impacts on teaching quality and school culture. Each interview was recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The second method was document analysis, which included school strategic plans, quality assurance reports,

evaluation results, meeting minutes, principal's work programs, SPMI and SOP documents, and BOS financial reports to verify and contextualize information from human sources (Nashrullah et al., 2023). The third method was a structured questionnaire using a Likert scale (1-5) administered to ten respondents to measure perceptions of leadership behavior, innovation culture, and school quality outcomes, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

Data analysis followed an interactive model consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Sidiq et al., 2019). Data reduction involved selection, simplification, and abstraction of raw data through coding of transcripts to identify relevant statements grouped into thematic categories such as leadership innovation strategies, teacher motivation, organizational communication, and quality management outcomes. Data display was conducted through narrative summaries, thematic matrices, and frequency tables to visualize relationships among categories. Conclusion drawing was performed by synthesizing findings into coherent interpretations verified through triangulation of data sources. For questionnaire data, descriptive percentage calculations using the formula $P = (F/N) \times 100\%$ were applied to identify the distribution and intensity of responses, with interpretation categories: 0-20% = very low, 21-40% = low, 41-60% = moderate, 61-80% = high, and 81-100% = very high. Data trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trail to guarantee credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The research involved ten participants comprising the principal and nine teachers representing various subject areas including classroom teachers, Islamic and Hindu religion teachers, and a physical education teacher. All participants possessed formal teaching qualifications (S.Pd or S.Pd.I/H) with a minimum of five years of experience in primary education, ensuring they had adequate knowledge of the school's organizational dynamics. Their average teaching tenure at the school ranged between 5 and 15 years, providing them with substantial familiarity with institutional practices and leadership approaches employed at SD Inpres Makapa A.

Quantitative Findings: Leadership Perception Assessment

The quantitative component of the study assessed teachers' perceptions of the principal's innovative leadership and its relation to educational quality management implementation. Twenty statements were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 1 presents the distribution of responses across all leadership indicators measured in this study.

Table 1. Summary of Leadership Indicator Responses

Leadership Dimension	No. of Items	Score Range	Mean Score	Peak Indicators (Score = 50)
Creative & Change-Oriented Leadership	5	45-49	47.0	-
Vision Building & Motivation	4	47-49	47.5	-
Innovation & Experimentation	4	47-50	48.5	Technology integration (Item 16)
Collaborative Culture	3	47-50	49.0	Open environment (Item 17), Valuing diversity (Item 18)
Professional Development	4	47-50	48.8	Training facilitation (Item 6)
Overall Performance	20	45-50	47.8	Average: 956/1000 (95.6%)

Source: Field questionnaire data (2025)

Note: All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale by 10 respondents (maximum score per item = 50). Four indicators achieved perfect scores: training facilitation, technology use, open environment, and valuing differing opinions.

The aggregated data revealed an overall mean percentage of 95.6%, indicating an exceptionally strong consensus among teachers regarding the principal's demonstration of innovative and quality-oriented leadership. The maximum possible score per item (50 points) was achieved for four indicators: facilitating training and adaptive climate (Item 6), promoting flexible use of educational technology (Item 16), building an open and idea-friendly environment (Item 17), and valuing differing opinions (Item 18). No indicators received disagreement or neutral responses, demonstrating remarkably consistent perceptions across the entire sample. The computed mean score per item was 47.8 ($SD = 1.94$), suggesting minimal variance and a narrow distribution around the upper end of the scale. This homogeneity underscores uniformly positive perceptions of leadership behavior across all measured dimensions.

Patterns in Quantitative Data

Three dominant patterns emerged from the numerical analysis. First, collaborative orientation was evident in indicators involving teamwork and shared vision (Items 3-5, 8, 13, 19, 20), which scored between 46 and 49 points. This pattern signifies that collaboration forms the foundational backbone of the principal's leadership approach. Second, adaptive and technology-driven practice was reflected in Items 6 and 16, both attaining the maximum score of 50, indicating strong alignment between leadership practices and 21st-century digital demands. Third, cultural and moral influence emerged through Items 12 and 18, demonstrating that moral support and respect for diversity are equally salient dimensions contributing to a healthy organizational climate. These patterns collectively indicate that innovative leadership at SD Inpres Makapa A manifests through inclusive decision-making, technological adaptability, and ethical guidance—three pillars essential for sustainable quality management in education.

Qualitative Findings: Principal's Leadership Practices

Semi-structured interviews with the principal yielded rich narratives illustrating the internalization and enactment of innovative leadership principles. The principal consistently emphasized participatory decision-making, stating that all teachers are actively involved in identifying problems and determining collective solutions. Training, seminars, and professional development forums were described as continuous mechanisms for exposing teachers to emerging pedagogical trends and educational innovations. The principal highlighted the importance of modeling openness to change, explaining that teachers must perceive the principal as a learner rather than merely a supervisor. This approach, combining humility with proactive initiative, creates an environment where teachers feel psychologically safe to experiment with classroom innovations, particularly through the integration of digital media and context-based projects such as the Family Medicinal Plants (TOGA) program incorporated into local content lessons.

Furthermore, the principal underscored the significance of moral leadership by providing ongoing motivation, public appreciation, and transparent communication regarding both financial and academic matters. The principal's commitment to transparency was explicitly articulated through statements emphasizing that open communication ensures no stakeholder feels excluded from important institutional decisions. This practice aligns with fundamental tenets of total quality management, where trust-building and accountability form the foundation for organizational improvement.

Teachers' Perspectives on Leadership Innovation

Teachers corroborated the principal's self-reported practices, describing the principal as a genuine change agent who initiates and sustains school-wide reforms. They noted that staff meetings serve not only administrative functions but also provide forums for collaborative program design. One teacher remarked that the principal actively encourages participation in online workshops and promotes resource-sharing through digital platforms such as WhatsApp groups. Another concrete example cited by teachers concerned the TOGA project, where the principal encouraged the integration of environmental and health education by establishing a herbal plant garden used for both science instruction and local content learning. Teachers acknowledged that this initiative significantly

increased student engagement and provided tangible evidence of innovative practice during the school's accreditation evaluation process.

The qualitative data thus support three interrelated themes. First, shared vision and empowerment were evident as teachers perceived their inclusion in vision formulation as strengthening both ownership and professional responsibility. Second, innovation through experimentation was facilitated through the principal's provision of autonomy and psychological safety, enabling teachers to trial new methods without fear of punitive consequences. Third, a motivational and ethical climate was cultivated through emotional support, procedural fairness, and systematic recognition, fostering collective pride and sustained professional commitment.

Documentary Evidence of Quality Management Implementation

Document analysis confirmed the existence of multiple artifacts substantiating the operationalization of innovative leadership practices. Curriculum and planning documents demonstrated localized curriculum adaptation (RPP and syllabus) integrating cultural and environmental content, reflecting contextual responsiveness. Supervision and evaluation records included scheduled classroom observations and detailed follow-up reports, illustrating systematic instructional supervision aligned with quality improvement goals. Training certificates and attendance lists provided concrete proof of continuous professional development activities strategically aligned with institutional objectives. Quality management documents (SPMI, SOP) contained clearly defined procedures for internal quality assurance, reflecting alignment with national education standards. Financial transparency records (BOS reports) were publicly displayed, ensuring accountability in resource utilization and budget allocation.

Table 2 summarizes the documentary evidence identified during the analysis phase.

Table 2. Summary of Documentary Evidence

Observed Aspect	Evidence Found	Verification Status
Curriculum contextualization	Curriculum documents, lesson plans, local content integration	✓ Confirmed
Supervision routine	Observation schedules, assessment sheets, evaluation reports	✓ Confirmed
Teacher professional development	Training certificates, attendance records, workshop documentation	✓ Confirmed
Collaborative program design	Meeting minutes, strategic planning documents	✓ Confirmed
Quality management system	SPMI and SOP documentation	✓ Confirmed
Financial transparency	BOS reports, public budget displays	✓ Confirmed
Technology provision	Procurement proposals, ICT inventory	● Partial
Facility utilization optimization	Usage schedules, laboratory documentation	● Limited

Source: Document analysis (2025)

The documentation corroborates empirical findings from interviews and questionnaires, demonstrating that innovation and transparency are not merely rhetorical commitments but institutionalized practices embedded in official records and operational procedures. Partial evidence regarding technology provision and limited evidence concerning facility utilization indicate areas requiring future enhancement and strategic investment.

Unexpected Findings

Although the overall trend was overwhelmingly positive, two noteworthy deviations emerged from the analysis. First, documentation related to ICT infrastructure revealed that several proposals for technology acquisition remained pending due to budgetary constraints, suggesting that leadership intent does not always translate immediately into resource availability. Second, while teachers expressed consistently high levels of motivation and satisfaction, they also noted limited material incentives for sustained innovation beyond intrinsic motivation and moral support. These observations

highlight structural challenges—particularly funding limitations and resource allocation mechanisms—that could moderate the long-term sustainability of innovative practices despite exemplary leadership intentions and commitment.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence

Both data strands converge toward the interpretation that the principal's leadership style is transformational-innovative, characterized by clear vision articulation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Quantitative agreement levels align remarkably well with qualitative testimonies concerning participatory and adaptive practices. The triangulated evidence reinforces the credibility and internal validity of the findings, demonstrating coherence across multiple methodological approaches and data sources.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that innovative leadership of the school principal at SD Inpres Makapa A plays a critical role in implementing and sustaining educational quality management, achieving an exceptionally high perception score of 95.6% across all measured indicators. This discussion interprets these findings within broader theoretical frameworks and situates them in relation to existing international and national literature, while also examining their implications, limitations, and contributions to knowledge.

The quantitative and qualitative findings strongly support the theoretical proposition that transformational leadership significantly enhances organizational performance in educational settings. The principal's emphasis on creativity, openness to change, and collaborative vision-building aligns closely with core dimensions of transformational leadership identified by Bass and Avolio (1994), including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Recent empirical evidence corroborates this relationship: Bao (2024) demonstrated that principal transformational leadership significantly enhances teacher innovative behavior through the mediating role of teachers' sense of meaning at work, while Kılıç et al. (2024) found that transformational leadership influences teachers' commitment and innovative practices with trust in the principal serving as a crucial moderating factor. The present findings extend these insights by demonstrating that transformational leadership in rural Indonesian contexts operates through similar psychological and social mechanisms, despite resource constraints that characterize such settings.

Moreover, Handayani et al. (2025) emphasized that transformational leadership shapes innovative school practices by fostering deeper learning experiences through shared vision and individualized support. The current study's evidence of participatory decision-making, psychological safety for experimentation, and moral encouragement reflects these transformational dimensions. Teachers' testimonies about feeling empowered to experiment with teaching innovations mirror findings from Ghamrawi (2024), who demonstrated that teacher empowerment through transformative professional development models cultivates leadership capacity and proactive engagement in continuous improvement. The consistency between our findings and international research suggests that transformational leadership principles transcend cultural and geographical contexts, operating effectively across diverse educational systems.

The exceptionally high scores on indicators related to collaboration, shared vision, and stakeholder alignment (Items 3-5, 8, 13, 19-20) underscore the pivotal role of collaborative leadership in quality management implementation. This finding resonates with recent systematic reviews indicating that transformational leadership significantly improves school performance through enhanced teacher motivation, collaborative culture development, and increased staff commitment (Supandi, 2023). The Global Education Monitoring Report 2024 emphasizes that collaborative rather than hierarchical leadership approaches are critical to quality education, with principals functioning as instructional leaders who empower teachers in decision-making and provide necessary training and resources (UNESCO, 2024).

The mediating role of teacher motivation observed in this study aligns with recent evidence from Chinese contexts, where teacher collaboration significantly enhances innovation ability through the chain mediation of teaching motivation and teaching efficacy (Qin et al., 2025). The psychological pathway through which collaboration strengthens motivation, which subsequently enhances efficacy and drives innovative practice, appears universally applicable. Furthermore, Nassir & Benoliel (2025) concluded from research in Turkey's centralized education system that transformational leadership impacts collaborative and innovative school culture, teacher self-efficacy, and collective efficacy—outcomes strikingly similar to those observed at SD Inpres Makapa A. This cross-national consistency suggests that the mechanisms linking leadership, motivation, and quality outcomes operate robustly across different governance structures and cultural contexts.

The achievement of maximum scores (50 points) on indicators related to technology integration (Items 6, 16) reflects the principal's successful adaptation to 21st-century educational demands. This finding is particularly significant given the post-pandemic imperative for digital transformation in education. Lamčja (2022) documented how innovative leadership in post-pandemic developing country contexts requires principals to navigate digital transformation challenges while addressing learning recovery and community participation. The present study demonstrates that even in resource-constrained rural settings, visionary leadership can promote technological adaptation through creative resource mobilization and sustained professional development.

However, the documentary evidence revealing pending ICT procurement proposals indicates a gap between leadership vision and infrastructural reality—a challenge widely documented in developing contexts. This discrepancy highlights what Fütterer et al. (2024) identified as the necessity for school leaders to possess an open innovation mindset that fosters collaborative cultures of knowledge exchange, even when material resources are limited. The principal's strategy of promoting flexible technology use within existing constraints demonstrates adaptive capacity, yet sustainable digital integration ultimately requires systemic support beyond school-level innovation.

The findings affirm that innovative leadership serves as the primary driver for operationalizing quality management principles in primary education. The principal's practices of systematic supervision, transparent communication, and evidence-based decision-making reflect core tenets of Total Quality Management (TQM) adapted for educational contexts. Anderson et al. (2024) emphasized that continuous improvement in education requires systematic processes involving stakeholder feedback, iterative refinement, and accountability mechanisms—elements clearly evident in the present study. The establishment of SPMI and SOP documentation, regular evaluation cycles, and participatory planning processes demonstrate institutionalized commitment to quality assurance beyond individual leadership charisma.

Recent research on TQM in educational settings confirms that leadership and empowerment are the most critical factors influencing teacher job satisfaction and continuous improvement (Shahmohammadi, 2017). The present study's findings that teachers feel valued, motivated, and psychologically safe to innovate suggest that these TQM principles are effectively operationalized at SD Inpres Makapa A. Moreover, the integration of continuous improvement frameworks—as outlined by Langley et al. (2009) and recently applied in educational contexts by Anderson et al. (2024)—appears to function effectively even in resource-limited rural schools when driven by committed and innovative leadership.

An important contribution of this study is its demonstration that innovative leadership can thrive in Indonesian rural contexts characterized by limited resources and geographic remoteness. The TOGA project exemplifies contextually responsive innovation, integrating local environmental knowledge with formal curriculum requirements. This finding resonates with emerging scholarship on glocalization in education, where global pedagogical innovations are adapted to local cultural contexts (Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė & Barkauskienė, 2023). The principal's ability to cultivate a collaborative culture despite resource constraints reflects what De Jong et al. (2023) identified as distributed leadership embedded

in sociocultural contexts, where stronger leadership practices foster collaborative spirit and shared commitment to educational development.

The study also reveals that moral and ethical dimensions of leadership—respect for diversity, transparent communication, and emotional support—are equally valued alongside technical competencies in Indonesian educational culture. This finding challenges Western-centric leadership models that often prioritize managerial efficiency over relational ethics, suggesting that culturally responsive leadership frameworks must incorporate indigenous values and social norms.

The identification of funding constraints and limited material incentives as moderating factors represents a critical unexpected finding with significant implications. While the principal's innovative leadership successfully generates intrinsic motivation and professional satisfaction, structural limitations in resource allocation could eventually undermine sustainability. This observation underscores the necessity for multi-level policy interventions that align leadership empowerment with adequate resource provision. As noted in recent policy analyses, effective school improvement requires not only capable leadership but also systemic flexibility, ongoing evaluation mechanisms, and development of leadership capacity through sustained training and support (McREL International, 2014).

The partial evidence of technology infrastructure and limited facility utilization also suggests that innovation in resource-constrained contexts operates more effectively in organizational culture and pedagogical practice than in physical infrastructure development. This finding has important implications for education policy, indicating that capacity-building investments should prioritize leadership development and professional learning communities alongside infrastructural improvements.

Theoretically, this study advances understanding of how innovative leadership functions as a mechanism for educational quality assurance in developing contexts. It demonstrates that leadership innovation is not merely about adopting new technologies or methods but fundamentally about creating organizational cultures characterized by trust, experimentation, collaboration, and continuous learning. The findings support the integration of Innovation Leadership Theory (Vieira et al., 2022), Educational Quality Management Theory (Sallis, 2022), and Transformational-Servant Leadership paradigms (Greenleaf, 2021; Hallinger, 2022) into a unified framework applicable to primary education in emerging economies.

Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for school leaders, supervisors, and policymakers. The principal's specific strategies—participatory decision-making, transparent communication, contextualized innovation projects, continuous professional development, and moral encouragement—provide a replicable model for similar schools. Education authorities should prioritize leadership training programs that cultivate these competencies while simultaneously addressing structural barriers through improved resource allocation and policy support. The study also suggests that accreditation and quality assurance systems should evaluate not only compliance with standards but also the presence of leadership practices that foster sustainable improvement cultures.

This study acknowledges several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the research was conducted at a single school, limiting generalizability to other contexts with different leadership dynamics, resource levels, or cultural characteristics. Second, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions and practices at one point in time, precluding longitudinal analysis of how leadership effects evolve or whether observed outcomes are sustained over extended periods. Third, the relatively small sample size ($n=10$) and potential social desirability bias in self-reported data may have influenced response patterns, particularly given the hierarchical nature of school organizations. Fourth, while triangulation strengthens validity, the study relies primarily on perceptions rather than direct observation of leadership behaviors or objective measures of student learning outcomes. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, larger samples, multiple case comparisons, and direct measurement of student achievement to strengthen causal inferences and external validity.

This study's primary conceptual contribution lies in demonstrating that innovative leadership in resource-constrained primary schools operates through interconnected mechanisms of psychological empowerment, collaborative culture-building, and adaptive problem-solving rather than through material resource advantages. The findings challenge deficit narratives that attribute educational quality primarily to infrastructure and funding, revealing instead that visionary leadership capable of mobilizing social capital, fostering intrinsic motivation, and institutionalizing continuous improvement processes can achieve substantial quality gains even within structural constraints. This insight has profound implications for educational development strategies in emerging economies, suggesting that investments in leadership capacity-building may yield higher returns than purely infrastructural interventions. The study thus enriches theoretical understanding of leadership-quality linkages while offering evidence-based pathways for achieving educational equity and excellence in diverse global contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that innovative leadership of the school principal at SD Inpres Makapa A significantly contributes to the effective implementation of educational quality management, achieving an exceptional perception score of 95.6% across all measured leadership indicators. The findings reveal that innovative leadership operates through three interconnected mechanisms: collaborative decision-making that fosters shared ownership, adaptive practices that integrate technology and contextual innovation, and moral-ethical guidance that sustains teacher motivation and organizational trust. The principal's specific strategies—including participatory planning, transparent communication, continuous professional development, and psychological safety for experimentation—successfully operationalize quality management principles even within resource-constrained rural contexts.

Theoretically, this research advances understanding of how innovative leadership functions as a critical mechanism for educational quality assurance in developing contexts, demonstrating that leadership innovation transcends material resources by leveraging social capital, intrinsic motivation, and collaborative culture. The study contributes empirical evidence supporting the integration of Innovation Leadership Theory, Educational Quality Management frameworks, and Transformational-Servant Leadership paradigms in primary education settings. Practically, the findings offer replicable strategies for school leaders and inform policy interventions that should prioritize leadership capacity-building alongside infrastructural investments to achieve sustainable quality improvement.

However, this study acknowledges limitations including single-site design, cross-sectional data collection, small sample size, and reliance on self-reported perceptions rather than direct observation of student learning outcomes. Future research should employ longitudinal designs across multiple schools with diverse contexts, incorporate objective achievement measures, and examine how leadership effects evolve over time. Additionally, comparative studies investigating the differential impact of innovative leadership across urban-rural divides and varied resource availability would enrich understanding of contextual factors moderating leadership effectiveness. Such research would provide more robust evidence for designing culturally responsive and contextually adaptive leadership development programs that advance educational equity and excellence across diverse Indonesian educational landscapes.

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