

STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN IMPLEMENTING DEEP LEARNING-BASED INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM

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Abstract:

This study aims to describe the principal's decision-making strategy at SDN 020/XI Koto Lebu, Pondok Tinggi District, Sungai Penuh City, in supporting effective school management and improving teacher performance, particularly in the implementation of the deep learning-based Independent Curriculum. The study employed a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation studies, with key informants being the principal, teachers, and education staff. Data analysis was conducted through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results showed that the principal's decision-making strategy was carried out systematically, participatory, and data-driven, through the stages of problem identification, information collection and analysis, deliberation with the school community, and continuous evaluation of the policies taken. This approach reflects the optimal implementation of the principal's managerial functions, including planning, organizing, implementing, and supervising. An open and accountable decision-making strategy has been shown to have a positive impact on improving teacher performance, creating harmonious cooperation, and successfully implementing the deep learning-based Independent Curriculum. This study confirms that the principal's decision-making is a strategic factor in improving the quality of school management and the quality of learning in public elementary schools.

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan strategi pengambilan keputusan kepala sekolah di SDN 020/XI Koto Lebu, Kecamatan Pondok Tinggi, Kota Sungai Penuh, dalam mendukung pengelolaan sekolah yang efektif dan meningkatkan kinerja guru, khususnya dalam implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka berbasis deep learning. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi wawancara mendalam, observasi non-peserta, dan studi dokumentasi, dengan informan utama adalah kepala sekolah, guru, dan staf pendidikan. Analisis data dilakukan melalui tahapan reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi pengambilan keputusan kepala sekolah dilakukan secara sistematis, partisipatif, dan berbasis data, melalui tahapan identifikasi masalah, pengumpulan dan analisis informasi, musyawarah dengan civitas sekolah, dan evaluasi berkelanjutan terhadap kebijakan yang diambil. Pendekatan ini mencerminkan implementasi optimal fungsi manajerial kepala sekolah, termasuk perencanaan, pengorganisasian, pelaksanaan, dan pengawasan. Strategi pengambilan keputusan yang

terbuka dan akuntabel telah terbukti berdampak positif dalam meningkatkan kinerja guru, menciptakan kerja sama yang harmonis, dan berhasil menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka berbasis deep learning. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa pengambilan keputusan kepala sekolah merupakan faktor strategis dalam meningkatkan kualitas pengelolaan sekolah dan kualitas pembelajaran di sekolah dasar negeri.

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INTRODUCTION

A leader is the primary figure responsible for directing and achieving organizational goals. Likewise, a leader in an organization manages the process until goals are achieved (Dedik, 2025). The success of an organization depends heavily on the quality of leadership during that period. Leadership style has a significant influence on achieving success, as explained in Wahyudin et al. (2024). One leadership style that works very well and is effective is transformational leadership. Effective leadership is characterized by the leader's ability to instill the values of discipline, responsibility, and character, while simultaneously encouraging improved academic and non-academic achievement in students (Rusmin, 2025). This shows that one of the keys to successful leadership is leadership style. Whether an organization achieves success or even fails is largely determined by its leadership style (Rusma Yulidawati, 2019). A meaningful statement stating that a leader is responsible for any failure in a task demonstrates the importance of a leader's position within an organization. An organization serves as a place where management takes place, as this is where management activities become part of one of the subsystems within the organizational structure.

Along with the development of the study of the philosophy of science, it also has an impact on the development of science. (Darim, 2020). Due to the strong academic tradition and the availability of research facilities in Western countries, this naturally attracts scientists and students from various countries, particularly Muslim communities. One field of study experiencing rapid development is educational management (Ananda & Marlius, 2021). Management is a method or means that drives an organization to achieve its desired goals. Within the scope of a manager's function, decision-making is a crucial aspect of the managerial role, known as the decisional role. In making managerial decisions, a manager is expected to be bold in taking action based on personal considerations within their authority as a leader, or methods that emerge from discussions that consider the ideas, feelings, or suggestions of organizational members (Abduh, 2016).

Every successful organization must be able to make decisions that enable it to achieve its goals and meet its primary needs. After all, all management activities and functions essentially revolve around decision-making (Arestanti, Herawati, & Rahmawati, 2016). Decision-making is a crucial aspect of a manager's or principal's role in an educational setting. This activity is particularly influential when managers or principals carry out their planning roles. Planning involves crucial, long-term choices that managers can make. In the planning process, managers determine the organizational goals to be achieved, the resources to be utilized, and who will carry out each required task. All stages of planning involve

managers or principals in a series of decision-making situations. The quality of the decisions made by managers will influence the success of the plans they have developed (Handoko, 2012). Decision making is the act of selecting alternatives.

Robins (Rifa'i, 2019), reveals that "the decision-making process is when a person makes a choice from two or more options." This statement highlights that decision-making is the step of choosing one option from several available options. In the (U. Ayub & Syukri, 2014) it is explained that decision-making involves rationally selecting alternative options and avoiding illogical choices without adequate data support and weak reasoning. A decision is a clear response to a question. A decision should provide an answer regarding the actions to be taken and the matters discussed in the planning context.

One of the challenges principals must face is the recent curriculum changes in several schools in Indonesia. Government policies support the Merdeka curriculum in educational institutions (Keputusan Menteri Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia Nomor 56 tahun 2022). This is a challenge that principals must address by considering various aspects in order to align government aspirations with school readiness, existing human resources, and available facilities and infrastructure. Principals need to make decisions in these circumstances. Sometimes, this is related to regulations set by the government, which often lead to variations in their implementation within educational institutions. The impact of this situation is significant for the schools they lead. The role of a leader in creating a healthy environment for implementing various strategies for the advancement of Islamic educational institutions is crucial. This is because a manager's role is to address the complex challenges faced by Islamic educational institutions (Lestari, 2024).

The principal acts as a leader in an educational institution, and has the obligation to manage all educational activities involving all resources in the school he leads (Firdaus, Rosadi, Islam, Bandung, & Ethic, 2021). Obligations and challenges that must be faced relate to achieving graduate competency standards that align with the school's vision and mission and the changing times. One indicator of an educational institution's success in achieving graduate competency standards is the principal's role in decision-making.

Decision-making is one of the duties performed by a principal to determine the direction of educational institution policies outlined in various programs, both short-term and medium-term. This process is closely related to leadership style and management methods (Rahayu, 2021). A leader will be seen from the form of his existence in making decisions and determining his policies.

Teachers are a crucial component with a significant impact on the entire education system and deserve primary attention and focus. Therefore, any effort to improve the quality of education will not yield significant results without the support of professional and expert teachers. (Lailatussaadah, 2020). In other words, to improve the quality of education, the first step must be taken by teachers. As professionals, teachers serve as driving forces in the world of education, striving to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. In this context, teachers are expected to possess strong competencies, so that improved teacher competencies will lead to positive learning outcomes, ultimately contributing to quality education. Regarding the success of the learning process, Sanjaya stated that "the success of a learning process depends on the teacher." Therefore, success in the learning process is greatly influenced by the skills and qualities of the

teacher (Handoko, 2012). To be able to carry out their duties well, teachers are required to possess four mandatory competencies to improve performance in learning. In this case, Chaniago (2017) Competence is defined as the ability to reflect a person's suitability for performing a task. Competence is a crucial element for every individual, as competent individuals can demonstrate quality and efficiency in their work. Improving teacher performance plays a vital role in efforts to improve the quality of learning, which ultimately influences the quality of graduates and impacts the achievement of national educational goals.

Research on the role of principals in decision-making in the education sector has progressed significantly over the past two decades. Various studies emphasize the principal's position as a key individual impacting the effectiveness of school management, improving the quality of teaching by teachers, and the successful implementation of education policies. Research by (Rahmawati et al., 2022) and (U. M. Ayub & Syukri, 2004) emphasizes that decision-making is the most important part of a principal's managerial role. Decisions made wisely, involving participation, and based on data have been shown to increase teacher commitment, strengthen the organizational environment, and support the achievement of school goals. However, these studies still view decision-making as a general variable, without in-depth analysis of the stages of the process and the dynamics of decision-making in the real-world context of schools.

In terms of managerial leadership (Puspitasari, 2021) and Firdaus et al., (2021) highlights the importance of a principal's managerial skills, character, and social relationships in improving teacher morale and performance. This study reinforces the view that leadership success depends not only on formal power but also on the principal's ability to interact and collaborate. However, existing research still focuses more on the result and has not sufficiently examined the decision-making process as part of a managerial strategy. In the new educational policy environment, particularly related to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, research conducted by (Jani, 2023) and (Lestari, 2024) Studies have shown that the success of curriculum implementation depends heavily on the principal's ability to adapt and innovate. Principals are expected to make informed choices amidst changes in the curriculum, teacher preparedness, and limited school resources. However, much of this research remains broad and theoretical, and has not clearly explained the relationship between principal decision-making and the efficiency of school management and the performance of teachers implementing immersive learning methods.

Methodologically, previous research has been dominated by quantitative approaches that emphasize causal relationships between variables, such as the causal relationship between principal leadership variables, particularly decision-making, as the independent variable, and various managerial outputs and teacher performance as the dependent variables. Several studies statistically examine the influence of principal decision-making on teacher job satisfaction, work motivation, leadership accountability, and teacher performance through regression, correlation, and path analysis. For example, research conducted by Gogik (2023) found that the principal's decision-making and leadership effectiveness had a significant effect on teacher job satisfaction, with a fairly large contribution to the explanation of variance, indicating a direct causal relationship between decision quality and teacher working conditions. Study Purnama et al., (2024) also shows a significant relationship between principal decision making

and teacher work motivation, which indicates that managerial decisions are positioned as a factor causing increased motivation. Meanwhile, Susanto (2016) confirms that rational decision-making is positively related to the accountability of principal leadership. However, these studies generally view decision-making as a single variable measured through questionnaire scores, thus failing to delve deeply into the process, stages, and dynamics of decision-making in the real-life context of schools, particularly in the face of the implementation of new policies such as the Independent Curriculum.

This approach is not yet fully able to explain the processes, considerations, and strategies of principals in making decisions in real-life school situations, particularly in public elementary schools with specific social and cultural characteristics. Based on this assessment mapping, this research is positioned to complement and deepen the study of educational leadership by placing the principal's decision-making process as the primary focus of analysis, integrated with the context of the implementation of the deep learning-based Independent Curriculum in public elementary schools.

Based on the recent studies above, several relevant and important research gaps warrant further investigation. First, in terms of focus, previous research often separates principal leadership, decision-making, and teacher performance. There is still little research that comprehensively addresses principal decision-making as a management strategy that simultaneously impacts school management effectiveness and teacher performance improvement. Second, in a policy context, studies on principal decision-making to support the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, particularly those focused on deep learning, are still very limited. This policy requires principals to make decisions that are adaptable, contextual, and data-driven, tailored to actual school conditions. Third, in terms of methodological approach, the dominance of quantitative methods makes it difficult to understand the dynamics of principal decision-making processes, including the stages of observation, problem identification, planning, deliberation, and decision implementation in schools. Therefore, qualitative research is needed that can reveal these processes in depth and context. Fourth, in an empirical context, research focusing on public elementary schools in regions with limited resources and challenges in implementing national policies is still quite rare. This situation opens up opportunities for contextual research that provides a concrete picture of principal leadership practices in the field.

Based on this gap, this research is highly urgent because principal decision-making is at the heart of educational leadership and management practices, particularly in the face of national policy changes such as the implementation of the deep learning-based Independent Curriculum. Although various previous studies have quantitatively demonstrated a causal relationship between principal decision-making and teacher performance, work motivation, and school management effectiveness, these studies are still partial and tend to view decision-making as a single variable measured through questionnaires. As a result, the process, stages, and dynamics of decision-making in the real-world context of schools remain incomplete. Furthermore, there is still limited research specifically examining principal decision-making strategies in public elementary schools, particularly in schools with limited resources and specific socio-cultural characteristics. Yet, at the elementary education level, principals play a strategic role in ensuring teacher readiness, learning effectiveness, and the successful

implementation of new curriculum policies. Therefore, qualitative research is needed that can deeply reveal how principals observe problems, formulate alternatives, involve relevant stakeholders, and execute decisions contextually. This research is expected to fill the gap in empirical studies and make a tangible contribution to the development of leadership and management in elementary education.

This research focuses on in-depth disclosure of the principal's decision-making process and strategies in the context of public elementary schools, particularly in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum based on deep learning. This research not only offers empirical novelty but also conceptual contributions in enriching the study of educational leadership and management, making it relevant and worthy of further in-depth study. This study aims to determine the Principal's Decision-Making Strategy at SDN 020/XI Koto Lebu, Pondok Tinggi District, Sungai Penuh City. This research is expected to contribute to the development of science, and researchers hope this research can be used as a reference for further research.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people or behavior observed by the researcher (Fadli, 2021). Data sources are where data can be obtained (Priatna, 2020). The primary data sources in this study are human and non-human. The human data sources are the principal and teachers or other staff at the educational institution, and these data are formed in the form of interview transcripts and field notes. Meanwhile, non-human data is documentation containing matters related to Islamic education management. Based on the approach in this study is qualitative, which requires data sources in the form of words or actions, as well as data used as supporting data, such as documentation and others. In this study, the type of data is a set of questions submitted by the research subjects in response to questions posed by the researcher according to the research focus that has been previously determined as a research guideline (Sugiyono, 2020). The data collection procedures in this study include in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies.

In-depth interviews: Qualitative methods often use data collection tools to capture the underlying meaning of specific interactions. In-depth interviews are the process of obtaining information for research purposes through face-to-face question-and-answer sessions between the interviewer and the interviewee, with or without the use of interview guidelines. (Chaniago, 2017). The interview technique used in this study is an unstandardized interview conducted without compiling a strict list of questions. Furthermore, this unstandardized interview was developed into three techniques, namely: 1) unstructured interviews (unstructured interviews or passive interviews), 2) somewhat structured interviews (somewhat structured interviews or active interviews), and 3) casual interviews (casual interviews). In non-participant observation (Non-participant observation), the researcher is not involved and only acts as an independent observer. The non-participant observation technique is used to complement and test the results of interviews given by informants who may not be comprehensive or unable to describe all the details of the situation, or may deviate (Sugiyono, 2020). Non-participant observation was conducted in three stages, starting with a

broad descriptive observation by generally describing the social situation that occurred in the environment of SDN 020/XI Koto Lebu. Next, a focused observation was conducted to find categories such as the leadership of the principal, teachers, and curriculum. Finally, after repeated analysis and observation, a further narrowing was carried out by conducting selective observation by looking for differences between categories, such as the interaction of the principal with teachers, teachers with students, and learning models in the classroom. The findings of the research results were recorded as field notes, and the results of the observation records were then reflected as research results. Documentation Study.

This research also uses data collection tools from non-human sources, namely documents, which are any written or recorded material, photographs, or videos (Abdussamad, 2021). Qualitative data analysis, as defined by Bogdan and Biklen as quoted by Moleong, is an effort made by working with data, organizing data, sorting it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for and finding patterns, finding what is important and what is learned, and deciding what can be told to others (Garcia, Ana Rita, Filipe 2019) As for the stages in data analysis in this research, they include the following: Data Reduction, focusing attention, simplifying, abstracting and transforming data that emerges from field notes is called data reduction (Abdussamad, 2021). Reducing data means summarizing, selecting key points, focusing on important points, looking for themes and patterns, and discarding unnecessary information. Data Display: The next step in the analysis is data display. Data presentation aims to organize the reduced data, structured in a relationship pattern, making it easier to understand. Data presentation can be in the form of narrative descriptions, charts, relationships between categories, flowcharts, and other similar forms. Data Verification: The next step in the qualitative data analysis process is drawing conclusions based on the findings and verifying the data. The initial conclusions presented are still provisional and will change if strong evidence is found to support the next stage of data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings presented previously, the principal's decision-making strategy at SDN 020/XI Koto Lebu is not only formal and structured but also demonstrates a participatory and data-driven leadership approach. The principal does not make decisions alone, but takes several steps, starting with identifying problems, gathering information, discussing with stakeholders at the school, and continuously evaluating the decisions made. This approach reinforces previous findings that the principal's decisions focus on effective school management and improving the quality of learning.

Interview result contains the results that the decision-making process carried out by the principal is carried out by the stages of observation, data collection, planning and identifying problems related to education in schools, then holding discussions among teachers, to take a policy or decision, the principal carries out interpersonal approaches to teachers to carry out organizing activities, supervision as a controlling activity carried out by the principal which is outlined in the teacher's work assessment, to increase the potential of teachers the principal participates in training and competition activities. This is in accordance with what was expressed by experts, namely, according to (Lian, 2017) The principal functions as an educator, manager, administrator, and supervisor. George

R. Terry also explained that the principal's duties as a manager include planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling.

Interviews with the school operator, Mr. Jaka Esa Purta A.Md., revealed that the principal consistently uses data as the basis for decision-making. The school operator stated that every policy related to learning administration, student registration, Dapodik management, and Independent Curriculum reporting always begins with a thorough analysis of school data. This finding demonstrates that the principal has implemented evidence-based decision-making principles, ensuring that the policies adopted are not merely intuitive but also rational and measurable. As explained by (Wijiati, Sari, Ningrum, & Komariyah, 2025) explains that evidence-based decision-making is a key principle in educational management. This principle emphasizes the importance of using valid and verified data as the basis for policy-making. This approach allows for objective, logical, and accountable decisions. The process involves identifying problems, analyzing data, selecting available options, and conducting ongoing evaluations. In the context of school leadership, the application of this principle helps improve the effectiveness of school management, teacher performance, and the quality of learning. Furthermore, it fosters a reflective organizational culture that continually strives for self-improvement. A reflective organization, strong collaboration, and a focus on continuous improvement.

According to Edwin A. Locker and Associates in Syarwani Ahmad 2016 in (Fatimah, 2020) The principal must possess basic managerial skills, namely: 1) technical skills, 2) human relations skills, and 3) conceptual skills. Technical skills related to the specialized knowledge needed to carry out the primary functions of a school supervisor. These technical skills include classroom observation, setting teaching objectives, developing teaching systems, demonstrating teaching skills, and conducting research. Human relations skills relate to the principal's ability to collaborate by motivating teachers to work diligently. These skills respond to individual differences, listen to suggestions from others, resolve conflicts, and set a good example. Meanwhile, conceptual skills are the principal's ability to make decisions and see important relationships in achieving goals. These activities also include prioritizing, analyzing the environment, monitoring, and controlling classroom activities.

Interviews with the Deputy Principal for Curriculum, the Committee Treasurer, and the Administrative Staff concluded that the principal implements an open, participatory, and accountable decision-making strategy. Each policy is formulated through a process of socialization, discussion, and coordination with relevant parties, covering aspects of administration, financial management, and learning policies. This approach not only improves work effectiveness and the sense of responsibility of the school community but also strengthens stakeholder trust and supports the implementation of the Deep Learning-based Independent Curriculum, aligned with the school's vision and mission.

The principal's decision-making process must encourage the realization of the school's vision and mission through planned and phased programs. Decision-making in organizations and educational institutions in the digital era has become faster, more accurate, and more data-driven through the use of information technology (Aryadi, n.d.). The principal as a decision maker must have and understand the principal's competencies, which include Personality competencies, namely having noble morals, developing a culture and tradition of noble morals,

and being an example of the morals of a leader's personality. Having personal integrity as a leader. Having a strong desire to develop oneself as a principal. Being open in carrying out his main duties and the function of controlling himself in facing problems in his work as a principal, having talent and interest in the position as a principal, Managerial competency in preparing school plans for various levels according to needs, Having an entrepreneurial spirit, namely creating innovations that are useful for school development, working hard to achieve the success of the school/madrasah as an effective learning organization. Having a strong motivation to succeed in carrying out his duties and functions as a leader who never gives up and always seeks the best solutions in facing the school. Having an entrepreneurial instinct in managing school/madrasah product/service activities for student learning resources.

Ministerial Regulation No. 28 of 2010 states that the decision-making process carried out by the principal, guided by educational competencies, will result in decisions to improve teacher performance. Schools granted school-based autonomy allow the principal to develop, implement, and make decisions about school programs that are appropriate for the school community. Decision-making reflects the principal's attitude as a leader, and this is inseparable from the principal's quality and performance. According to Whitmor (Studi, Manajemen, & Palembang, 2025), performance is a person's potential, an act, an achievement, a public display of skills. The principal in decision-making is carried out by directly involving the curriculum representative and teachers, in determining the school policies he leads. In the teaching and learning process, the activities of teachers are more varied in learning.

The results of an interview with one of the teachers, Mr. Bilyasri, on October 27, 2025. The principal's assertiveness as a manager in the decision-making process involves all the teachers in the school environment; there is an increase in teacher attendance and cooperation between teachers. The principal has social skills to mobilize teachers, staff, and stakeholders in their duties, responsibilities, and authority in making decisions for the advancement of the school. The knowledge possessed by the principal in the form of ideas and concepts is used to be implemented by teachers for the advancement of the school he leads. The learning process activities are more varied, and the ability to use IT for learning and administrative activities. According to Jani, (2023) To achieve success, the ability to face and overcome difficulties and accept risks, the leader will be able to empower himself to achieve success. Leaders who have higher resilience to adversity will influence and improve performance, productivity, creativity, health, perseverance, endurance, and validity more than those who have low resilience. The results of this study concluded that the performance of teachers at SDN 020/XI Koto Lebu has increased. In the learning process, the teachers are more varied in developing learning models for the Independent Curriculum Based on Deep Learning.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the principal's decision-making strategy at SDN 020/XI Koto Lebu, Pondok Tinggi District, Sungai Penuh City, and its impact on teacher performance. Based on interviews and field data collection, it is known that the principal's decision-making process is carried out systematically through the stages of problem identification, data collection and analysis, deliberation with

the school community, policy implementation, and ongoing evaluation. This approach indicates that decision-making is not carried out individually but rather involves the active participation of various parties within the school environment.

The research results show that the principal implemented a participatory, open, and data-driven decision-making strategy. Every policy related to learning, school administration, financial management, and the implementation of the Independent Curriculum was based on accurate data and the results of discussions with teachers, education staff, and school stakeholders. This strategy reflects the principal's application of competencies, including personality, managerial, and entrepreneurial competencies, as mandated by Minister of National Education Regulation No. 28 of 2010.

The findings of this study provide an important contribution to the field of educational management, particularly regarding principal leadership in decision-making. This study confirms that evidence-based and participatory decisions can create a conducive work climate, increase trust among school residents, and strengthen a reflective organizational culture oriented toward continuous improvement. Thus, this study enhances understanding of effective school leadership practices in supporting educational quality improvement.

The practical implications of this study indicate that appropriate principal decision-making strategies have a positive impact on improving teacher performance. Teachers demonstrated increased discipline, collaboration, a variety of learning models, and the ability to utilize information technology and implement the Deep Learning-based Independent Curriculum. Therefore, it is recommended that principals continue to develop participatory and data-driven decision-making, and that future researchers further examine principal leadership strategies in different contexts and educational levels to expand on the findings of this study.

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