Educational Management

Qualitative Study on Leadership, Teacher Performance, and School Environment in Academic Improvement

Idhi Fitanto [1✉], Widiyanto[2]

[1,2] Universitas Negeri Semarang

Article Info	Abstract
	This research explores the collective influence of school leadership, teacher performance, and a child-centered educational environment on students' academic success at SD Negeri Dawuhan 03, Sirampog, Brebes. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, immersive observations, and document reviews. Participants included school leaders, instructional staff, and learners. The findings suggest that collaborative and reflective leadership practices substantially enhance the educational experience. The principal's role extended beyond administration, acting as a guide and motivator for teacher innovation. Teachers with strong pedagogical skills, continuous engagement in professional learning, and inclusive classroom strategies had a significant positive impact on student learning. Furthermore, the implementation of child-friendly principles such as inclusive spaces, mental health support, and a zero-tolerance policy on bullying was instrumental in maintaining learner engagement and attendance. Despite these efforts, challenges such as limited resources, inadequate supervision during recess, and uneven parental involvement persisted. Ultimately, academic improvement was found to be most successful when leadership, teaching quality, and school climate worked cohesively. The study offers practical implications for policy initiatives aimed at strengthening primary education outcomes.

✉Correspondence Address :
Kampus Pascasarjana UNNES Jl. Lamongan Tengah No.2, Bendan
Ngisor, Kec. Gajahmungkur, Kota Semarang
E-mail : idhifitan@students.unnes.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

Enhancing academic outcomes for students remains a critical mission for educational systems globally, especially at the foundational levels of schooling where essential skills in literacy, numeracy, and socialization are cultivated. Numerous investigations have highlighted that academic progress is multifaceted, shaped by curriculum content, instructional quality, institutional infrastructure, and administrative leadership. Among these, three core dimensions principal leadership, teacher effectiveness, and a nurturing school environment are frequently cited as primary contributors to student achievement. Yet, despite widespread recognition, integrated studies examining their combined effects, particularly in

the context of Indonesian elementary education, are still sparse.

Leadership within educational institutions is increasingly seen not solely as an operational task but as a transformative force capable of defining school identity, influencing pedagogical approaches, and aligning institutional resources toward learning objectives. Hallinger and Heck (2010), along with Leithwood et al. (2004), have emphasized that school leadership contributes significantly to improved academic outcomes by fostering collaboration, setting instructional priorities, and shaping positive school climates. Nonetheless, in many Indonesian public primary schools, leadership remains entrenched in administrative formalities, thereby limiting its transformative capacity and reducing its direct engagement with teaching and learning processes.

Concurrently, teacher performance is widely acknowledged as a crucial element in determining student success. As evidenced by Darling-Hammond (2000) and supported by OECD (2019) findings, teaching excellence characterized by subject mastery, adaptive pedagogy, and strong classroom engagement plays a pivotal role in driving learning. However, significant disparities in teacher performance continue to persist in Indonesian schools, particularly in rural regions where professional growth opportunities and institutional support are often insufficient. These gaps hinder the consistent delivery of quality education and reinforce inequities in student outcomes.

Equally essential is the learning environment, especially the adoption of child-friendly school (CFS) models that prioritize inclusivity, student well-being, and participatory governance. Rooted in international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and promoted nationally by Indonesia's Ministry for Women Empowerment and Child Protection, CFS principles support academic growth by cultivating safe and engaging school spaces. Nevertheless, varied implementation quality due to limited awareness, uneven resource distribution, and inconsistent administrative support remains a challenge.

While prior literature has contributed to understanding each of these domains

independently, there is a clear lack of comprehensive analysis that explores the synergies among leadership, instructional performance, and the school environment. The current research addresses this critical void by adopting a holistic lens to study their interconnectedness. Such integration is vital to guide policies and school-level interventions that reflect the complex realities of educational improvement.

Moreover, the concentration of past studies on urban and well-resourced schools limits the applicability of their findings to more disadvantaged educational settings. Rural and semi-rural institutions often operate under constraints that affect leadership implementation, teacher capacity, and learning infrastructure. To bridge this gap, the current investigation focuses on SD Negeri Dawuhan 03 a primary school in a non-metropolitan region of Central Java highlighting the practical challenges and successes in leveraging leadership, pedagogy, and school climate for academic advancement.

Initial field observations revealed academic disparities among students that could not be solely explained by individual cognitive ability or curricular design. Instead, broader institutional factors such as leadership style, instructional dedication, and environmental support played a prominent role. This study seeks to substantiate these initial findings through empirical inquiry based on qualitative triangulation methods.

The overarching aim is to explore how leadership behaviors, teacher performance levels, and inclusive environmental practices collectively influence academic results. Specifically, the study seeks to:
1. Examine the leadership practices of the school principal in enhancing academic achievement;
2. Investigate the impact of teacher performance on student academic outcomes;
3. Analyze the role of child-friendly school environments in supporting learning;
4. Understand the interaction among these elements in the context of a public primary school.

This research contributes not only to academic discourse but also to practical school

management by offering a systems-based perspective on school improvement. The findings are expected to support data-informed decisions in educational policy and empower practitioners with context-sensitive strategies for sustainable academic success.

METHOD

This investigation was conducted using a qualitative approach framed within a case study design to capture the complex dynamics among leadership, instructional quality, and school environment. The study was carried out at SD Negeri Dawuhan 03, a public elementary school situated in Sirampog District, Brebes Regency, Central Java. This school was purposively selected due to its observable efforts in academic development, child-centered initiatives, and leadership practices.

Participants in the study were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on those directly involved in the school's academic and administrative activities. The primary participants included the school principal, six classroom teachers, a group of students across various grades, and several parents to obtain multiple perspectives.

Data were collected using three main methods to ensure comprehensive coverage and triangulation:

1. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, students, and selected parents. These interviews aimed to elicit rich, descriptive insights regarding leadership behaviors, teaching practices, and the school environment.
2. Direct Observation: The researcher engaged in non-participant observation of daily school activities, including classroom instruction, extracurricular programs, and school assemblies. Observations were systematically recorded to identify behavioral patterns and contextual dynamics relevant to the research objectives.
3. Document Analysis: Institutional documents such as school vision and mission statements, student academic records, teacher performance assessments, and policy implementation reports were examined to support and validate data gathered through interviews and observations.

The analytical framework employed was the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the data reduction phase, raw data from transcripts and notes were coded and categorized based on emerging themes. The data display stage involved organizing themes into matrices and narrative forms to identify connections and trends. The final stage focused on interpreting the results and confirming them through cross-validation among data sources.

To ensure data credibility and trustworthiness, several validation strategies were applied, including:
   a) Triangulation of sources (interviews, observations, documents);
   b) Member checking by allowing participants to review and confirm interview transcripts;
   c) Peer debriefing with academic colleagues to reduce bias and enhance analytical rigor.

Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study. Participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms. Data were used solely for research purposes and stored securely.

This rigorous and multi-dimensional methodological approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of how leadership, teacher effectiveness, and school climate interact to support student academic performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
Results

The findings from this study highlight three primary factors that collectively influence the academic success of students in elementary education settings: leadership practices by the principal, teacher performance, and the quality of the school's child-friendly environment. These results emerged from a detailed analysis of interviews, observations, and institutional

documents, which were coded into thematic categories aligned with the study's objectives.

1. Leadership Influence on Academic Achievement The principal was found to play a pivotal role in establishing a learning-oriented school culture. Strategic actions such as formulating shared goals, promoting continuous teacher development, and conducting routine academic monitoring contributed to shaping an environment that values academic excellence. The principal also demonstrated leadership by modeling reflective practices, engaging in transparent communication, and encouraging collaborative decision-making. This leadership approach significantly increased teacher motivation and student accountability.

2. Teacher Performance and Instructional Quality High-performing teachers exhibited key characteristics such as strong content knowledge, adaptive instructional strategies, and sensitivity to individual student needs. They consistently implemented interactive teaching methods and utilized varied assessment tools to monitor learning progress. Their commitment to professional growth was evident in their participation in training programs and peer collaboration initiatives. These practices were positively associated with improved student engagement and achievement across multiple grade levels.

3. Role of a Supportive and Inclusive Environment A child-friendly school climate emerged as a significant contributor to student well-being and academic readiness. The school implemented inclusive policies, provided accessible and safe learning spaces, and cultivated a culture of respect and non-violence. Physical infrastructure enhancements, such as clean classrooms and safe recreational areas, supported concentration and reduced absenteeism. Additionally, student participation in decision-making and school activities promoted a sense of belonging and intrinsic motivation.

The combined effect of proactive leadership, effective teaching, and a nurturing environment created a cohesive system that fostered improved academic outcomes. Stakeholders across all levels administrators, teachers, students, and parents recognized the interdependence of these elements in achieving educational success. These findings underscore the importance of designing school improvement strategies that address multiple dimensions simultaneously rather than focusing on isolated components.

Discussion

The results of this study reinforce the interconnected nature of leadership, teaching performance, and environmental factors in shaping student academic outcomes. Each element functions not in isolation but as part of an educational ecosystem that thrives on cohesion, collaboration, and shared purpose.

First, the critical role of the school principal in fostering academic excellence is evident. Principals who demonstrated transformational leadership qualities such as visionary thinking, participatory management, and ongoing instructional supervision were instrumental in creating school cultures centered on achievement. These findings align with Leithwood et al. (2020), who emphasize that leadership remains a central lever in educational improvement, second only to direct classroom instruction in its influence on learning outcomes. In under-resourced contexts like rural Indonesian schools, this type of leadership becomes even more vital as it compensates for structural deficits through strategic vision and staff empowerment.

Second, the influence of teacher performance is closely tied to the quality of instruction and student engagement. This study confirms that pedagogical expertise, consistent motivation, and adaptive teaching strategies are all positively linked to student learning. The findings are in agreement with Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), who argue that teacher quality is the most influential school-based factor impacting student achievement. When teachers operate within an environment that encourages reflection, collaboration, and professional development often nurtured by effective

leadership their capacity to deliver impactful instruction increases significantly.

Moreover, the school environment particularly when designed around child-friendly principles plays a fundamental role in creating conditions conducive to learning. The data from this study indicate that inclusive, respectful, and safe environments enhance students' emotional well-being and academic motivation. This supports the UNICEF (2019) framework, which positions child-friendly schools as vehicles for educational equity and effectiveness. By promoting physical safety, psychological support, and participative learning, schools not only improve attendance but also strengthen students' intrinsic commitment to academic success.

A key contribution of this study lies in its integrative perspective. Unlike studies that examine these factors independently, this research explores how leadership, instruction, and school climate interact in practical settings. The combination of strong leadership, engaged teaching, and a nurturing environment was found to be more effective than focusing on any single domain. This finding responds to the need for systemic reform strategies that take into account the interdependencies within school structures.

From a policy standpoint, these results suggest that holistic school reform must consider cross-cutting investments. Leadership development programs should include components that address both managerial capacity and pedagogical vision. Simultaneously, efforts to enhance teacher quality must be supported through structured mentoring, peer learning communities, and access to continuous training. Improving the learning environment also requires coordinated action ensuring that infrastructure, school culture, and safety policies are aligned with student development goals.

Furthermore, the rural setting of this research contributes a contextual layer often underrepresented in educational literature. While much of the existing scholarship is grounded in urban or well-funded schools, this study highlights how effective leadership and committed teaching can transcend contextual limitations when strategically implemented.

In conclusion, the findings offer practical guidance for educators, administrators, and policymakers committed to raising academic standards in primary schools. By acknowledging and enhancing the synergy between leadership, teacher performance, and child-centered environments, schools can create sustainable conditions for learning. Future research may extend this work by incorporating longitudinal designs or student-centered narratives to capture evolving educational dynamics more deeply.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that student academic performance at the elementary level is significantly influenced by the combined effects of effective school leadership, high-quality teacher performance, and a supportive, child-centered school environment. Rather than functioning independently, these components interact synergistically to create a school ecosystem that fosters continuous learning, engagement, and achievement.

The findings affirm that transformational leadership manifested through visionary direction, inclusive decision-making, and consistent academic oversight plays a pivotal role in shaping school culture and promoting academic focus. Teachers contribute to this process through their pedagogical competence, adaptability, and commitment to student-centered practices, which directly enhance learning outcomes. Simultaneously, a child-friendly learning environment offers emotional safety and inclusivity, enabling students to thrive both academically and socially.

This integrative model demonstrates that academic success cannot be pursued through isolated interventions. Instead, systemic approaches that align leadership, teaching practices, and environmental design are essential for sustainable educational improvement.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:
1. For policymakers: Invest in professional development programs that strengthen both instructional and leadership capacities of school administrators and educators. Support cross-sector collaboration to ensure child-friendly standards are implemented consistently.

2. For school leaders: Adopt leadership strategies that emphasize instructional supervision, staff empowerment, and data-driven decision-making to foster academic excellence.

3. For teachers: Engage in continuous learning and peer collaboration to enhance instructional practices. Embrace inclusive teaching strategies that respond to diverse student needs.

4. For future researchers: Expand the scope of investigation by exploring longitudinal impacts of leadership-teaching-environment synergy and integrating student voices for richer contextual insights.

In sum, schools that cultivate a shared vision among leaders, teachers, and students within a safe and inclusive environment are better positioned to support and sustain academic achievement.

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