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Managerial competence of school principals in improving the quality of elementary education services

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the managerial competence of elementary school principals in improving educational service quality in Lebak Regency. A paradox was identified between two schools: one successfully transformed limited resources into high service quality and student achievement, while the other remained in a transitional phase. The research aimed to analyze the implementation of the personality, social, and professional dimensions of principals' managerial competence in mobilizing the Standards for Educators and Educational Personnel and its implications for service quality and student achievement. A qualitative descriptive approach with a comparative case study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving principals, teachers, and the local education office, then analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman with source and technique triangulation. The findings showed that the principals applied a power-with approach, calm presence modeling, data-driven instructional leadership, optimization of non-permanent teachers based on competence, and dialogical clinical supervision. These practices improved teachers' pedagogical competence, created a conducive learning environment, and enhanced student achievements up to the national level. The study concluded that principals' managerial competence is the primary factor in continuous quality improvement in elementary schools, even under resource constraints.



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Introduction

The quality of basic education services in Indonesia is largely determined by the effectiveness of school principals' managerial leadership. Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System comprehensively regulates standards of content, process, graduate competence, educational personnel, facilities and infrastructure, management, financing, and educational assessment. Its function is to develop abilities and shape the character and civilization of individuals who are faithful, pious, noble in character, healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, and responsible democratic citizens (Republic of Indonesia, 2003; Sastramayani & Badarwan, 2019; Lusiana, 2024). In managing rapid and competitive change, strong managerial resources are required to improve the quality of teaching and learning processes in schools (Suyono et al., 2022).

The managerial role of the school principal strongly determines school policy direction through planning, organizing, implementing, and supervising subordinates to achieve organizational goals reflected in actual

performance (Suryati, 2023; Setiawan et al., 2023). Principals are no longer merely administrative officials but instructional leaders who must also be sensitive to social developments within the school and community in order to continuously improve the quality of educational services (Sabila et al., 2023; Dhillon et al., 2019; Syafrudin, 2022; Hidayati et al., 2025).

Effective managers do not use formal authority to dominate (power-over); instead, they foster collective strength (power-with) among all members of the organization (Bednarek & Smith, 2024). The balance between formal authority and human relations serves as a thin boundary that prevents school governance from falling into oppressive managerialism (du Plessis, 2023). In the elementary education ecosystem, principals often face a policy dissonance between top-down bureaucratic demands and the real needs of teachers in the classroom (bottom-up). Therefore, principals' managerial competence is critically tested in bridging external regulations so that they remain oriented toward improving the actual quality of learning services at the school level (Bush, 2026; Connolly et al., 2019).

Failure to align these regulations can trap school governance in rigid management practices (Rizescu et al., 2020). To address this tendency, the quality standards of educational personnel need to focus on three dimensions of professional management: lesson preparation, teaching practice, and learning evaluation (Dacholfany et al., 2024; Alimova et al., 2025). Effective leaders also require self-awareness and data-driven decision-making strategies (Trevisan et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Teachers' success in adopting transformative pedagogical competence highly depends on how practice partnerships are facilitated at the school level (McGeown et al., 2023). At the operational level, the effectiveness of knowledge transfer and the improvement of teachers' pedagogical competence are strongly influenced by the collaboration models designed by school management (Opstoel et al., 2024). The philosophy of continuous improvement within the framework of Total Quality Management (TQM) serves as an important foundation in this process (AlMasaeid et al., 2025).

Initial observations in Lebak Regency revealed an interesting paradox. SDN 2 Bintang Resmi successfully transformed limited facilities and a shortage of civil servant (ASN) teachers into high-quality educational services and student achievements up to the national level. In contrast, SDN 5 Cijoro Pasir remains in a transitional phase and is still building internal capacity to meet the Standards for Educators and Educational Personnel (PTK). This difference indicates that the implementation of managerial competence is situational and highly dependent on the adaptive strategies applied in each school.

Previous studies on school principal management have been dominated by single-case studies or quantitative approaches that measure the relationship between managerial competence and teacher performance. In-depth comparative studies examining managerial practices in two schools with contrasting quality assurance positions—high-performing schools versus schools in transition—remain limited, particularly in areas with limited ASN teachers. Furthermore, strategies for optimizing non-permanent teachers (GTT) through a value-based approach and the principle of the right man on the right place have not been widely explored.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze the implementation of school principals' managerial competence (personality, social, and professional dimensions) in mobilizing the PTK Standards and to examine its implications for improving school service quality and student achievement at SDN 2 Bintang Resmi and SDN 5 Cijoro Pasir. The study employs a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, complemented by source and technique triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 2009).

The findings reveal that principals in both schools applied a power-with approach, calm presence modeling, data-driven instructional leadership, optimization of GTT teachers, and dialogical clinical supervision. These interventions successfully increased teachers' enthusiasm and pedagogical competence, created a conducive learning ecosystem, and drove student achievement accumulation up to the national level. These findings enrich the understanding of how managerial competence can serve as an instrument for continuous quality improvement amid resource constraints. Overall, this study concludes that school principals' managerial competence is a key determining factor in improving educational service quality and student achievement in elementary schools. Nevertheless, the study is limited to senior principals and has not examined the dynamics of younger principals facing internal resistance, nor has it measured the long-term sustainability of a quality culture. These two aspects open important avenues for future research.. Last, please avoid making a sub section in Introduction.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive analytical design using a comparative case study method. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research problem required an in-depth, holistic, and contextual understanding of the managerial behavior, policies, and social dynamics of school principals in their natural setting. The comparative case study design was deliberately selected to critically and systematically compare the implementation of the three dimensions of managerial competence (personality, social, and professional dimensions based on Regulation of the Director General of Teachers and Education Personnel Number 7327/2023) in two elementary schools with contrasting quality assurance positions and student achievement levels.

The research was conducted in 2026 at two public elementary schools under the Education Office of Lebak Regency, Banten Province: SDN 2 Bintang Resmi, representing a school that has successfully transformed limited resources into high service quality and optimal student achievement, and SDN 5 Cijoro Pasir, representing a school still in a transitional phase and actively building internal capacity to meet educational quality standards. These two sites were selected through purposive sampling based on their contrasting achievement profiles and managerial contexts.

The primary informants were the principals of both schools. Supporting internal informants consisted of classroom and subject teachers from each school, selected to provide perceptions of work enthusiasm, the impact of managerial policies, and real changes in classroom practice. Supporting external informants included school supervisors and representatives from the Elementary Education Division of the Lebak Regency Education Office, who provided objective comparative data on school governance, quality assurance climate, and achievement records at the macro level.

Data were collected through three concurrent techniques. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, and education office representatives to explore managerial competence, teacher motivation, operational challenges, and quality alignment strategies that were not fully captured in official documents. Passive participatory observation focused on the principals' daily managerial interactions and task delegation, teachers' collaborative activities within internal Learning Communities (Kombel), and the physical and social school environment reflecting service quality and character formation. Documentation studies examined school work programs, academic supervision programs, official records, certificates, and inventories of student academic and non-academic achievements.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, conducted continuously from the pre-field stage through data collection and after all data had been gathered. The process consisted of data condensation (selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming raw field notes, interview transcripts, and documents), data display (presenting organized information in narrative text and comparative matrices), and conclusion drawing and verification. Verification was strengthened through source triangulation (cross-checking principals' accounts with teachers' perceptions and education office assessments) and technique triangulation (comparing interview data with observation findings and official documents).

The study assumed that the selected informants possessed relevant knowledge and experience regarding the managerial practices under investigation and that the contrasting conditions of the two schools would yield meaningful comparative insights. The methodology is limited by its focus on two specific schools in Lebak Regency and on senior female principals, which may constrain the naturalistic generalizability of the findings to other contexts, particularly those involving younger principals or different regional policy environments. No statistical tests were employed, as the study is qualitative in nature and prioritizes depth of understanding over numerical generalization.

Results and Discussions

The findings of this comparative case study reveal that the implementation of school principals' managerial competence in the three dimensions—personality, social, and professional—plays a decisive role in mobilizing the Standards for Educators and Educational Personnel (PTK) and driving continuous quality improvement in elementary schools facing resource constraints.

In the personality dimension, both principals demonstrated emotional maturity and a consistent calm presence when confronting limited facilities and organizational stress. Rather than displaying frustration, they modeled resilience and moral integrity, which created psychological safety for teachers. This finding aligns with the expectation that intrapersonal maturity enables leaders to convert constraints into collective commitment (Trevisan et al., 2025). Teachers reported feeling validated and motivated, confirming that authentic modeling is more influential than formal authority in sustaining work enthusiasm.

In the social dimension, the principals deliberately applied a power-with approach rather than hierarchical domination. Inclusive two-way communication, informal dialogue spaces, and the activation of internal Learning Communities (Kombel) successfully reduced professional isolation and seniority barriers among teachers. These practices correspond with the literature emphasizing collective efficacy and collaborative professional development (McGeown et al., 2023; Opstoel et al., 2024). The findings reinforce that social competence is not merely relational but a strategic instrument for distributing leadership and fostering mutual trust.

In the professional dimension, both principals exercised adaptive instructional leadership despite limited curriculum autonomy (OECD, 2020). They synchronized school curricula and teaching modules with Rapor Pendidikan data, applied impact-based budgeting of BOSP funds, and optimized non-permanent teachers (GTT) through a value-based approach guided by the principle of the right man on the right place. Clinical and dialogical supervision replaced inspection-oriented monitoring, shifting the focus from fault-finding to reflective improvement. These strategies proved effective in both the high-performing school (SDN 2 Bintang Resmi), where the emphasis was on sustaining quality and regenerating achievement, and the transitional school (SDN 5 Cijoro Pasir), where the priority was building internal capacity and teacher commitment.

The combined interventions produced clear implications for service quality and student outcomes. Teachers' pedagogical competence and work enthusiasm increased, classroom practices became more transformative and student-centered, and the learning ecosystem grew safer and more conducive. Consequently, student academic and non-academic achievements accumulated from the sub-district to the national level (OSN, FLS3N, O2SN). These results support the Total Quality Management philosophy of continuous improvement (AlMasaeid et al., 2025) and demonstrate that creative managerial competence can substitute for material limitations.

The findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the centrality of educational management in determining teaching and learning quality (Alimova et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). However, they extend existing knowledge by providing comparative evidence from two contrasting school contexts in a resource-constrained rural-suburban setting and by documenting the practical optimization of GTT teachers—an area previously underexplored.

Alternative explanations, such as differences in school location or community socioeconomic status, were considered but found insufficient to account for the observed quality leap. The decisive factor remained the adaptive application of the three managerial competence dimensions. The practical relevance of these findings lies in offering an operational blueprint for principals and education offices seeking to improve elementary school quality without relying solely on additional physical resources or additional civil-servant teachers.

Nevertheless, the study has limitations. It focused on two schools led by senior female principals, so the findings may not fully apply to younger principals facing stronger internal resistance. The cross-sectional design also limits insight into the long-term sustainability of the quality culture established. Future research is therefore recommended to examine the leadership dynamics of younger principals, to conduct longitudinal studies on the durability of quality improvement, and to test the value-based human resource management model in more remote or 3T (frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged) regions.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that school principals' managerial competence—encompassing the personality, social, and professional dimensions—serves as the primary determinant of continuous quality improvement in elementary education, even under conditions of limited facilities and insufficient civil-servant teachers. By applying adaptive strategies such as power-with leadership, calm presence modeling, data-driven instructional decision-making, value-based optimization of non-permanent teachers, and dialogical clinical supervision, principals successfully transformed constraints into improved teacher pedagogical competence,

a conducive learning ecosystem, and student achievements reaching the national level. These findings extend previous research on educational management by providing comparative evidence from two contrasting school contexts and by documenting a practical model for mobilizing limited human resources. The results affirm that effective managerial competence, rather than material abundance, is the critical lever for advancing educational service quality and student outcomes in resource-constrained settings, offering a relevant and original contribution to both theory and practice in elementary school leadership.

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