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The Role of the Principal in Developing a Literacy Culture: A Qualitative Study at SDN Brebes 09, Brebes Regency

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ABSTRACT

Low literacy achievement in Indonesia, as reflected in national and international assessments, underscores the urgency of strengthening literacy culture in schools. This study analyzes the role of the school principal in developing literacy culture at SDN Brebes 09, Brebes Regency. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings show that the principal performs three crucial roles: educator, motivator, and innovator. As an educator, the principal integrates literacy into daily learning, guides teachers, and models literacy practices. As a motivator, the principal fosters a supportive school climate, provides recognition, and conducts regular evaluations of literacy programs. As an innovator, the principal initiates creative programs such as Radigabluk (Rajin Membaca dan Menulis Buku), establishes reading corners, and engages parents in literacy activities. These efforts enhance students' reading interest, increase writing output, and strengthen teacher and parent involvement. The impact is evident in improved 2022–2023 Education Report scores and the BOS Kinerja award. The study concludes that principal leadership, through educational, motivational, and innovative roles, is pivotal in cultivating sustainable literacy culture in elementary schools.

1. Introduction

The results of the 2019 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey released by the OECD showed that Indonesia ranked 62nd out of 70 countries in literacy, placing the nation among the bottom ten with low literacy achievement. This condition illustrates that the literacy skills of Indonesians lag significantly behind neighboring countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. UNDP data further confirms Indonesia's relatively low education index compared to these countries. Nevertheless, Indonesia had once recorded a positive achievement in reducing illiteracy, with the literacy rate reaching 92.8% among adults and 98.8% among adolescents in 2014. These facts underscore the importance of continuous efforts to strengthen literacy culture in schools.

Literacy culture is one of the essential foundations in shaping a young generation that is excellent, of strong character, and globally competitive (Aedy & Dwijayanti, 2024; Jatnika, 2019). Literacy should not only be understood as the ability to read and write but also as a habit, attitude, and culture nurtured through consistent practice in daily life (Morrison, 2023; Suwandi, 2019). Therefore, schools need to continuously develop innovative literacy programs that foster students' interest in reading and writing from an early age (Kurniati, 2023; Zakiya, Malaikosa, & Sasomo, 2023).

The Indonesian government launched the National Literacy Movement (Gerakan Literasi Nasional, GLN) in 2015 as a systematic effort to promote literacy culture within families, schools, and communities (Faizah, 2016; Nopilda & Kristiawan, 2018). The implementation of literacy programs in elementary schools has been shown to improve literacy skills while simultaneously strengthening student character (Endaryanta, 2017; Faradina, 2017; Suyono et al., 2017). However, the success of these programs is heavily influenced by the leadership of school principals, who serve as decision-makers and key drivers within educational institutions (Fathurrohman & Rosdiana, 2022; Suhendra & Noor, 2022; Visayanti, 2021). School principals act as educators, motivators, and innovators who define the direction and strategies for developing literacy culture in schools (Mahfudi, 2023; Tawasako, Zainuddin, & Rossanty, 2023). Previous studies have also confirmed that visionary principal leadership can create a sustainable literacy ecosystem that positively impacts school quality (Handayani, 2020; Hida, Amala, & Hakeu, 2023). In other words, principal leadership functions as a catalyst bridging government programs with practical literacy initiatives in elementary schools.

The Concept of Literacy

Literacy is essentially not limited to the ability to read and write, but also encompasses critical thinking, speaking, listening, and reasoning skills needed to face the challenges of the 21st century. Literacy serves as an important tool for developing students' potential and shaping quality character (Morrison, 2023; Suwandi, 2019). Studies show that literacy habituation in elementary schools fosters reading and writing interest while strengthening students' character from an early age (Jatnika, 2019; Zakiya, Malaikosa, & Sasomo, 2023). The National Literacy Movement (Gerakan Literasi Nasional, GLN), launched by the government in 2015, is a strategic step to improve literacy skills at various levels of education. This program integrates literacy into family, school, and community life so that it becomes a sustainable culture (Faizah, 2016; Nopilda & Kristiawan, 2018). Other studies reveal that school literacy programs not only improve reading skills but also enhance academic achievement and create a conducive educational ecosystem (Endaryanta, 2017; Faradina, 2017; Suyono, Yasin, & Priyatni, 2017).

Literacy Culture in Elementary School

Literacy culture is a systematic effort to build a learning environment that fosters habits of reading, writing, and critical thinking as an integral part of daily life

(Handayani, 2020; Kurniati, 2023). The consistent implementation of literacy culture has been proven to improve student learning outcomes, including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects (Hida, Amala, & Hakeu, 2023; Tawasako, Zainuddin, & Rossanty, 2023). However, many elementary schools still face the challenge of low student reading interest. Therefore, innovative strategies based on local culture and literacy habituation programs need to be applied to encourage greater student engagement in literacy activities (Musdalifah, 2020; Umar, 2020). Research also highlights that facilities, learning media, and school community support are essential factors in the successful development of literacy culture (Aedy & Dwijayanti, 2024; Visayanti, 2021).

The Role of the Principal in Developing Literacy Culture

The principal holds a strategic role in creating and developing literacy culture in schools. As an educational leader, the principal functions as an educator, motivator, and innovator who mobilizes all school elements to actively participate in literacy programs (Fathurrohman & Rosdiana, 2022; Mahfudi, 2023). As an educator, the principal provides direction, guidance, and concrete examples to both teachers and students in daily literacy practices. As a motivator, the principal encourages teachers and students to embrace literacy as part of the school's culture (Suhendra & Noor, 2022). Meanwhile, as an innovator, the principal develops creative, adaptive literacy programs tailored to students' needs (Visayanti, 2021; Tawasako et al., 2023). Visionary principal leadership has been proven to improve literacy quality in elementary schools and positively impact the overall quality of education. Thus, the role of the principal is crucial in internalizing literacy as a sustainable culture in schools (Handayani, 2020; Hida et al., 2023).

A similar phenomenon is observed at SDN Brebes 09 in Brebes Regency, where the principal has initiated literacy programs that distinguish the school from others. Daily routines such as reading before lessons and the *Radigabluk* (Rajin Membaca dan Menulis Buku) program serve as tangible practices of principal leadership in embedding literacy culture. These innovations have proven effective in improving students' literacy outcomes, as demonstrated by significant improvements in the 2022–2023 Education Report. This achievement also enabled SDN Brebes 09 to receive the BOS Kinerja award for schools with the best progress. Based on this context, the present study focuses on the role of the principal in developing literacy culture at SDN Brebes 09, Brebes Regency, by examining the principal's roles as educator, motivator, and innovator in fostering literacy culture at the elementary school level.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of phenomena within their natural context, emphasizing the interpretation of meanings that emerge from social interactions (Arikunto, 2020). Through this approach, the data collected could comprehensively describe the role

of the principal in developing a literacy culture at SDN Brebes 09, Brebes Regency. In qualitative research, theory is not rigidly predetermined but rather developed based on data obtained in the field. This method provides flexibility for the researcher to identify patterns, concepts, and new theories through inductive analysis (Zuchri, 2021; Hardani, 2020).

The study was conducted at SDN Brebes 09, Brebes Regency, from June 2023 to September 2024. This location was selected because the school had implemented innovative literacy culture programs and was recognized as one of the high-achieving schools in Brebes Regency. The research design followed the stages of qualitative research, including problem identification, problem delimitation, focus determination, data collection, data processing and interpretation, theory generation, and reporting of research findings. These stages align with the view that qualitative research is cyclical and open to emerging discoveries (Hardani, 2020).

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the main instrument directly involved in data collection. The researcher acted as planner, implementer, observer, data collector, and analyst (Ghony & Almanshur, 2014). The researcher's presence in the field was participatory, allowing for intensive interaction with informants and facilitating a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study. The primary research instrument was the researcher, supported by auxiliary instruments such as interview guides, observation checklists, documentation guides, and audio-visual recordings. These instruments were used to obtain accurate and in-depth data regarding the principal's roles as educator, motivator, and innovator in developing a literacy culture (Aedy & Dwijayanti, 2024).

Data were collected through three main techniques: (1) Observation: The researcher conducted participatory observations to examine literacy activities at the school, including reading routines, literacy planning meetings, teacher training, and literacy innovation programs. This technique was chosen as it allowed the researcher to directly engage in the observed situations. (2) Interviews: Structured interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, students, and school supervisors to explore strategies, challenges, and best practices in developing a literacy culture. (3) Document Study: Documentation such as the school's vision and mission, literacy programs, activity reports, and education report cards was analyzed to complement the data obtained from observations and interviews (Endaryanta, 2017; Faizah, 2016).

Data validity was tested using four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Techniques applied included prolonged engagement, persistent observation, member checking, use of reference materials, and peer discussions (Handayani, 2020; Suhendra & Noor, 2022). Data triangulation was also employed by combining observation, interview, and documentation on the same sources, as well as time triangulation, to strengthen validity (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014), which consists of three concurrent activities: data condensation, data

display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data analysis was carried out simultaneously from the initial stages of data collection through to the final reporting stage, ensuring that conclusions were solidly supported by strong empirical evidence (Moleong, 2018).

3. Results and Discussion

SDN Brebes 09, located in Brebes Regency, is a public elementary school that has gained recognition for its dedication to fostering literacy development. The school serves a diverse student population and employs a team of teachers who are actively engaged in literacy initiatives under the leadership of the principal. Over the past few years, SDN Brebes 09 has implemented a number of literacy-based innovations, such as daily reading programs and creative writing activities, which have helped improve the school's overall educational performance. This commitment was reflected in the school's notable progress in the 2022–2023 Education Report, where literacy indicators showed significant improvement. Furthermore, the school received the BOS Kinerja award for demonstrating best progress among local elementary schools. This unique context made SDN Brebes 09 an appropriate and relevant setting for examining the role of school leadership in developing and sustaining a literacy culture.

To collect in-depth information, interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, and other stakeholders. The interview questions were designed to capture the multiple dimensions of leadership roles, particularly how the principal acts as an educator, motivator, and innovator in literacy development. The questions also sought to uncover challenges faced in the implementation process and to identify the observable impacts of literacy programs on both teachers and students. By structuring the interviews around specific themes, the data collected provided a comprehensive understanding of leadership practices and their influence on literacy culture at the school. The table 1 below presents the main interview questions used in this study.

Table 1. Interview Questions

No.	Interview Question	Focus Area
1	How do you integrate literacy activities into daily teaching and learning?	Educator
2	What strategies do you use to guide teachers in planning and implementing literacy programs?	Educator
3	In what ways do you motivate teachers and students to actively participate in literacy activities?	Motivator
4	What forms of recognition or rewards do you provide for teachers and students involved in literacy programs?	Motivator
5	Could you explain any innovative programs you have initiated to support literacy culture in this school?	Innovator
6	How do you involve parents and the wider community in supporting school-based literacy activities?	Innovator
7	What challenges have you faced in developing a literacy culture, and how have you addressed them?	All Roles
8	What impacts have you observed from literacy programs on students, teachers, and the school's performance?	All Roles

The Principal as an Educator

The principal serves as an educator by providing direction, guidance, and role modeling for both teachers and students. This role is realized through several programs and activities, including: (1) Reading habituation: a 15-minute reading session before classes begin, consistently implemented daily, with teachers accompanying students in reading non-textbook materials. (2) Teacher assistance in literacy planning: ensuring that every teacher integrates literacy activities into lesson plans and classroom programs. (3) Strengthening the school's vision and mission: embedding literacy-oriented values as guiding principles for all school activities. (4) Role modeling: actively reading books with students and encouraging teachers to demonstrate similar practices. Through these efforts, both teachers and students receive direct guidance and examples of how to embed literacy in daily school life.

The Principal as a Motivator

As a motivator, the principal fosters active participation of the entire school community in literacy programs by: (1) Providing recognition and rewards such as certificates, plaques, or small prizes for active readers and student writers, and acknowledging teachers' literacy achievements in school meetings. (2) Creating a supportive school climate that nurtures collaboration among teachers, students, and parents in literacy initiatives. (3) Strengthening teacher commitment by consistently emphasizing the importance of literacy during work and staff meetings. (4) Encouraging students directly by attending reading activities and motivating them to read with greater enthusiasm. Such motivational efforts increase the involvement of teachers, students, and parents in literacy activities.

The Principal as an Innovator

The principal's role as an innovator is evident in the creation of unique literacy programs tailored to the school's needs, including: (1) Radigabluk Program (*Rajin Membaca dan Menulis Buku*): encouraging students to read regularly and produce simple written works, later displayed or compiled to instill pride. (2) Classroom reading corners: providing book racks and light reading materials within classrooms for easy access outside library hours. (3) Creative literacy activities: organizing competitions such as poetry reading, short story writing, and storytelling. (4) Parental involvement: engaging the school committee and parents in literacy support, such as book donations or assisting children's reading at home. (5) External collaboration: partnering with the education office and other institutions to obtain books, teacher training, and program support. These innovations make literacy programs more varied, engaging, and inclusive of all students.

Impact of Literacy Culture Development

The implementation of the principal's roles as educator, motivator, and innovator has had tangible impacts on strengthening literacy culture at SDN Brebes 09, including: (1) Increased student reading interest, with daily reading routines, greater

library and reading corner use, and enthusiasm for literacy competitions. (2) Growth in student writing output, evidenced by an increase in short stories, poems, and reflective writing produced through Radigabluk. (3) Development of literacy facilities, with classroom reading corners enriched by diverse books from both school purchases and parental donations. (4) Greater teacher and parental involvement, with teachers facilitating literacy activities more actively and parents supporting reading at home. (5) Improved school quality, reflected in higher literacy indicators in the 2022–2023 Education Report and recognition through the BOS Kinerja award for best progress. Overall, these findings confirm that principal leadership, through its educational, motivational, and innovative roles, significantly contributes to building a sustainable literacy culture in elementary schools.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the principal of SDN Brebes 09 plays the roles of educator, motivator, and innovator in developing a literacy culture. These roles have had a significant impact on increasing students' reading interest, writing skills, teacher and parent involvement, and the overall quality of education in the school. The results strengthen existing theories and prior studies that emphasize the critical importance of school principal leadership in fostering literacy culture.

The Principal as an Educator

The principal's role as an educator is evident in providing direction, guidance, and role modeling for teachers and students in literacy practices. The principal emphasizes the importance of literacy as an integral part of the curriculum and daily learning activities. This finding aligns with Mahfudi (2023), who argues that the principal's educational function is essential in shaping schools as literacy-centered institutions. Moreover, the principal's exemplary practice of reading and writing exerts a positive influence on both teachers and students. Jatnika (2019) affirms that literacy culture can only grow when consistent modeling and habituation are provided by school leaders. Thus, the principal's educational role serves as the foundation for establishing a literacy ecosystem.

The Principal as a Motivator

The principal also acts as a motivator by offering recognition, encouragement, and creating a conducive atmosphere for literacy development. Such motivation drives teachers to remain consistent in implementing literacy programs, while students become more enthusiastic about reading and writing. This finding is consistent with Fathurrohman & Rosdiana (2022), who demonstrated that principal support and motivation enhance schoolwide participation in literacy activities. Likewise, Suhendra & Noor (2022) highlight that principal leadership boosts teachers' motivation to innovate, even in online learning contexts. Therefore, the motivational role of the principal functions as a primary driver of literacy culture.

The Principal as an Innovator

The principal's role as an innovator is reflected in the establishment of the *Radigabluk* (Rajin Membaca dan Menulis Buku) program, as well as other innovations such as classroom reading corners, literacy competitions, and parental engagement. These innovations have made literacy programs more appealing, varied, and relevant to students' needs. This finding supports Visayanti (2021), who found that principal-led literacy innovations in secondary schools positively influence students' reading interest. Similarly, Tawasako, Zainuddin, & Rossanty (2023) showed that principals' innovative strategies significantly enhance elementary students' literacy skills. Hence, the principal's innovative role is a crucial factor in creating sustainable literacy programs.

The Impact of Literacy Culture Development

The implementation of principal leadership at SDN Brebes 09 has generated tangible outcomes, including greater student reading interest, increased student writing output, and the development of literacy facilities. These impacts are also reflected in the improved scores of the 2022–2023 Education Report and the school's achievement in receiving the BOS Kinerja award. This result is in line with Handayani (2020), who stressed that strengthening literacy culture not only improves academic abilities but also shapes students' character. Furthermore, Hida, Amala, & Hakeu (2023) demonstrated that teachers' strategies, supported by principal leadership, enhance students' religious competence and personal development.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of the principal in developing a literacy culture at SDN Brebes 09, Brebes Regency. As an educator, the principal successfully integrated reading and writing activities into daily learning, designed structured literacy programs, and provided guidance to both teachers and students. These efforts significantly enhanced students' reading interest, literacy skills, and awareness of the importance of literacy in the school environment. As a motivator, the principal encouraged teachers, students, and the wider school community through recognition, strengthened commitment, and regular evaluations of literacy programs, thereby creating a supportive atmosphere that fostered active participation and engagement in literacy activities. As an innovator, the principal introduced various initiatives such as the *Radigabluk* (Rajin Membaca dan Menulis Buku) program, classroom reading corners, literacy competitions, and parental involvement in home reading practices. These innovations built an educational ecosystem that supports the development of a sustainable literacy culture. Overall, the principal's educational, motivational, and innovative roles have had tangible impacts, including increased student reading interest, greater student writing production, stronger involvement of teachers and parents, and improved educational outcomes. This impact is evident in the improved scores of the 2022–

2023 Education Report and the school's achievement in receiving the BOS Kinerja award.

The success of this research lies in its ability to provide empirical evidence of how principal leadership, manifested through educational, motivational, and innovative roles, contributes directly to the strengthening of literacy culture at the elementary school level. The novelty of this study rests in its integration of these three leadership roles into a comprehensive model that demonstrates their simultaneous impact on building a sustainable literacy ecosystem. This model not only enriches the theoretical understanding of educational leadership but also offers practical insights for policymakers, principals, and educators in designing contextually relevant strategies to improve literacy culture in schools.

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