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The Principal and Quality Culture at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru: Implementation of Data-Based Curriculum Evaluation and Reflection

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the principal's leadership role in developing a quality culture through data-driven curriculum evaluation and reflective academic supervision at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru. Using a qualitative case study design, the research explores leadership practices, school quality culture, and the mechanisms used to evaluate the curriculum. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis, then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's framework of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that the principal functions as an instructional and transformational leader who combines managerial competence, professional guidance, and teacher empowerment through continuous reflection. The integration of data-driven approaches using the Education Report, the Computer-Based National Assessment (ANBK), and Sulingjar instruments supports more objective decision-making to meet student needs and enhance teacher performance. Collaborative and reflective academic supervision further strengthens a culture of continuous improvement within the school. Challenges such as limited teacher data literacy and restricted time for reflection are addressed through targeted training, mentoring, and the reinforcement of collective learning practices. Overall, the leadership model implemented at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru serves as an effective example of adaptive, participatory, and sustainable curriculum management aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

1. Introduction

Principal leadership is a key factor in determining the success of educational management in educational units. Principals serve not only as administrative managers but also as learning leaders, playing a crucial role in building a culture of

quality within the school. Several recent studies emphasize that effective principal leadership directly influences school literacy culture, teacher professionalism, and overall school performance (Hardiman et al., 2025; Kamalia et al., 2022). In the current era of globalization and educational decentralization policies, principals are faced with the challenge of navigating curriculum changes, technological developments, and the dynamics of student needs. The principal's role is no longer limited to administrative management and coordination of routine activities, but has evolved into a visionary, inspirational, and adaptive leader. Ideally, the principal is a central figure in directing all school components to achieve meaningful educational goals, both in terms of academics and student character.

According to Aslamiah (2021), an effective principal is able to integrate managerial and instructional functions with a humanistic and data-driven approach to educational decision-making. This perspective is aligned with findings by Dewi et al. (2025), who reported that principals acting as instructional managers play a significant role in strengthening character education and learning quality in elementary schools. This means that a principal is required not only to understand administrative and planning aspects but also to possess the ability to mentor teachers, foster collaboration, and develop learning strategies supported by concrete data. Data-driven leadership enables the principal to objectively assess the effectiveness of school programs and policies, ensuring that decisions are truly aligned with the needs of students and teachers. This approach makes the principal not merely a supervisor but also a facilitator and mentor for the learning community within their school.

Meanwhile, research by Celia Cinantya (2023) in a junior high school in South Kalimantan showed that collaborative and reflective principal leadership can increase teacher commitment to a culture of quality and curriculum innovation. Similar conclusions were drawn by Basuki et al. (2025), who found that principals' leadership management significantly contributes to teacher development and sustained professional growth. These research findings emphasize the importance of principals in creating a work environment that supports collaboration among teachers and reflection on learning practices. Through reflective leadership, principals can guide teachers to continuously improve their learning strategies, thereby continuously enhancing the quality of education. This also aligns with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning and process-oriented evaluation, not solely focused on outcomes.

In the context of SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru, the principal's leadership role is evident in efforts to create a culture of quality through the implementation of data-based curriculum evaluation and collective reflection. This school strives to make curriculum evaluation not merely an administrative routine, but rather an institutional learning process involving all parties, from teachers and students to educational staff. Research by Rohyadi et al. (2025) supports this approach, highlighting that principal leadership grounded in local values and reflective practices effectively strengthens school quality culture. The principal took the initiative to collect data from various sources, such as formative assessment results, teacher learning reports, and student and parent feedback. This data is then analyzed

collaboratively to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum and learning strategies implemented. The reflection process is carried out collectively through evaluation forums, academic meetings, and lesson study activities, allowing teachers to learn from each other and refine their teaching approaches based on empirical findings.

The data-based evaluation approach led by the principal at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru focuses not only on improving student academic outcomes but also on aspects of character development, active teacher participation, and community involvement in supporting learning. Through this reflective mechanism, the principal has successfully built a culture of quality oriented towards continuous improvement. This culture of quality is reflected in teachers' increased awareness of the importance of self-evaluation, openness to constructive criticism, and enthusiasm for innovation in teaching. Thus, the principal's leadership at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru can serve as an example of how a visionary, collaborative, and data-driven leadership style can move all school components toward higher educational quality.

However, the implementation of this data-driven and reflective leadership also faces various challenges. These include low data literacy among some teachers, limited time for in-depth reflection, and technical constraints in managing learning data. Muzdalifa et al. (2025) noted that without continuous supervision and capacity building, school-based management initiatives often fail to reach their optimal impact. These conditions require the principal to continuously strengthen teacher capacity through training, mentoring, and creating an environment that supports professional learning. In the long term, this leadership practice has the potential to serve as a model for other schools in Kotabaru Regency, and even in South Kalimantan, in developing an adaptive, participatory, and sustainable curriculum management system. Therefore, a study of principal leadership and quality culture at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru is important, not only as a snapshot of local success but also as a contribution to the development of educational leadership theory and practice in Indonesia.

2. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study approach to deeply understand the principal's leadership role in building a culture of quality through the implementation of data-driven and reflective curriculum evaluation at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru. This approach was chosen to allow researchers to interpret the meaning of social phenomena contextually, as explained by Creswell (2018), who argues that qualitative research allows researchers to deeply explore participants' experiences in natural settings. Therefore, this study emphasizes describing the processes, dynamics, and practices of principal leadership oriented towards improving educational quality through an adaptive curriculum evaluation system.

This research was conducted at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru, Kotabaru Regency, South Kalimantan, considering that this school is one of the educational units actively implementing a data-driven curriculum management system. The study lasted three months, from January to March 2025, encompassing preliminary observation,

primary data collection, validation of findings, and preparation of the final report. Research subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique, where informants were selected based on their involvement in and understanding of the phenomenon under study. The key informants consisted of the principal, vice principal for curriculum, subject teachers, school supervisors, and the school committee. A total of ten informants represented key elements in school management. This technique was chosen to ensure the data obtained had depth and diverse perspectives, in line with the view of Miles and Huberman (2014), who emphasize the importance of diverse sources to strengthen the credibility of qualitative research.

Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation study. Interviews were conducted semi-structured with a guide covering key themes such as the principal's leadership style, curriculum planning and evaluation processes, the school's quality culture, and teachers' reflections on the results of academic supervision. Participatory observation was conducted during school activities, including observations of curriculum evaluation meetings, the principal's supervision activities, and classroom learning activities. Documentation study, meanwhile, involved collecting written data such as the School Work Plan (RKS), School Operational Curriculum (KOS) documents, curriculum evaluation reports, and teacher reflection notes. These three techniques complemented each other to provide a comprehensive picture of leadership practices and quality culture in the school.

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman (2014) model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions. Data reduction was achieved by selecting key information relevant to the research focus. The data was then presented in narrative form and a thematic matrix to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships between variables. Next, conclusions were drawn in stages through an iterative verification process by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation. The analysis process was interactive and ongoing throughout the study so that each finding could be validated through triangulation.

To maintain data validity, this study applied four criteria from Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was maintained through triangulation of sources and techniques, and validation of findings through member checking with informants. Transferability was achieved through the presentation of rich contextual descriptions so that the research results could be applied to other schools with similar characteristics. Dependability was ensured by conducting audits of the data and research process by peer mentors, while confirmability was ensured by systematically and transparently documenting each research step so that every conclusion could be traced back to its original source.

The research procedure was implemented through several stages, starting with a preliminary study and obtaining research permission from the school, followed by field data collection, interim data analysis during the research process, validation

of findings through reflection with informants, and preparation of the final report. Throughout the process, the researchers upheld research ethics, such as maintaining the confidentiality of informants' identities, obtaining consent before interviews, and using all data solely for scientific purposes. The principle of informed consent served as the basis for ensuring that each informant's participation was voluntary and free from any pressure. With this systematic and reflective method, it is hoped that the research results will make a tangible contribution to the development of educational leadership theory and the implementation of a data-driven quality culture in secondary schools.

3. Results and Discussion

SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru is a public junior high school located in an urban–coastal area of Kotabaru Regency with a diverse student demographic background. The school has 18 classes with approximately 600 students, supported by 42 teachers and several educational staff. The learning environment is relatively conducive, with adequate facilities such as multimedia classrooms, a computer laboratory, a library, and internet access that supports digital learning practices. Since 2022, the school has fully adopted the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and student-centered assessment. The implementation of this curriculum is carried out gradually through capacity-building workshops, internal teacher working groups (MGMP), and collaborative planning meetings led by the principal. Despite limitations in teacher readiness and data literacy, the school maintains a strong commitment to improving instructional quality through systematic reflection and evidence-based decision-making. This overall condition provides a fertile ground for the development of a school-wide quality culture driven by adaptive leadership and continuous improvement.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru is supported by structured planning and a collaborative teaching ecosystem. Teachers develop Teaching Modules (Modul Ajar) and learning scenarios aligned with student needs identified through diagnostic assessments and ANBK data. Regular academic meetings allow teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of learning strategies, adjust instructional differentiation, and refine assessment techniques based on ongoing reflection. The principal plays a central role in facilitating these processes by ensuring that all curriculum decisions are grounded in valid data from the Education Report, ANBK results, classroom observations, and Sulingjar reflections. Furthermore, the school emphasizes the integration of character education through Pancasila Student Profiles (Profil Pelajar Pancasila), which are implemented through project-based learning activities. Although the transition to the Merdeka Curriculum presents challenges such as uneven technological competence among teachers and limited time for reflection, the school continuously mitigates these issues through mentoring, collaborative coaching, and peer-support systems. Overall, the implementation of the curriculum reflects the school's commitment to quality, inclusivity, and sustainable improvement.

The research was conducted through a systematic qualitative procedure involving multiple data collection techniques, with in-depth interviews serving as the primary method. Interviews were carried out using a semi-structured format to allow flexibility while maintaining focus on core themes related to leadership practices, curriculum evaluation, and quality culture. Each interview session lasted between 45 to 70 minutes and was conducted face-to-face in the principal's office, the teachers' room, or other quiet areas to ensure confidentiality and comfort. Informants included the principal, vice principal of curriculum, subject teachers, and school supervisors selected through purposive sampling based on their role and relevance to the study. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure data accuracy, member checking was performed by returning the interview summaries to informants for validation. This process provided rich, authentic insights into the implementation of data-driven decision-making and reflective academic supervision within the school.

Table 1. Interview Questions

| No | Interview Questions |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | How do you describe your leadership approach in managing curriculum implementation at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru? |
| 2 | What data sources do you use to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum and learning practices? |
| 3 | How is the Education Report, ANBK data, and Sulingjar used in decision-making at the school? |
| 4 | What strategies do you apply to foster a culture of reflection among teachers? |
| 5 | How do collaborative academic supervision and coaching sessions support teacher development? |
| 6 | What challenges do you face in promoting data-driven practices among teachers? |
| 7 | How does the school ensure continuous improvement in teaching and learning quality? |
| 8 | How do teachers respond to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum? |
| 9 | What support systems are provided to help teachers adapt to curriculum changes? |
| 10 | In your view, what are the key factors that strengthen the quality culture at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru? |

Data-Driven Curriculum Planning

An interview with the principal of SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru revealed that the curriculum planning process at the school uses a data-driven approach. The principal explained that the primary data sources used were the Education Report Card (RAK), the Computer-Based National Assessment (ANBK), and the Sulingjar instrument completed by teachers and the principal. This approach illustrates a paradigm shift in curriculum management from an administrative approach to a reflective and collaborative model based on empirical evidence. Through this strategy, every decision in curriculum development is based on valid and accurate data, not solely on administrative policies.

Data obtained from the Education Report Card plays a crucial role because it contains various indicators of student achievement, such as literacy, numeracy, and character building. This information is used to review the strengths and weaknesses of the learning process in the previous period. The principal emphasized that the 2024 ANBK results will serve as a reference in developing the curriculum for 2025

and beyond. This creates a continuous planning and evaluation cycle between student learning outcomes and the implemented learning strategies. This evaluative pattern demonstrates the school's commitment to quality improvement based on reflection and concrete evidence in the field.

These findings align with the views of Suriansyah, Aslamiah, and Cinantya (2022) from Lambung Mangkurat University, who stated that "effective curriculum planning must be based on empirical data that reflects the real needs of students and the professional competence of teachers in the field" (p. 45). According to them, data is not only a performance measurement tool but also a means of reflection to continuously improve the quality of learning. Similarly, the use of the Sulingjar instrument helps teachers self-reflect on their learning practices. The results of this reflection are then discussed in a monthly forum, which serves not only as an administrative tool but also as a platform for coaching and collaborative reflection between teachers and the principal to identify learning problems and needs in a factual manner.

Furthermore, the principal emphasized that the success of curriculum planning depends not only on formal documents but also on the quality of academic supervision and a reflective culture within the teacher environment. Supervision is carried out in two forms: formal by the annual supervision team and informal through monthly reflections. This view is reinforced by Cinantya (2023), who emphasized that the success of curriculum implementation is greatly influenced by the active involvement of teachers in the ongoing reflection and evaluation process. Furthermore, human and psychological aspects are also primary concerns in curriculum planning. The principal applies the principles of instructional leadership, namely learning leadership that positions the principal as a facilitator and professional companion to teachers. Through innovations such as written coaching, teachers are given space to reflect honestly on their teaching practices, so that data, reflection, and empathy become the main foundations for building an adaptive and sustainable curriculum (Suriansyah, Aslamiah, & Cinantya, 2022).

Academic Supervision and Teacher Reflection

The implementation of academic supervision at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru demonstrates a well-planned supervision system focused on improving the quality of learning. The principal implements a reflection-based approach, emphasizing coaching and mentoring principles to enable teachers to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Interviews revealed that supervision is conducted not only formally through an annual schedule but also informally through monthly reflection forums. In these forums, teachers write reflections on their learning process, which then serve as the basis for discussions and individual coaching. This approach reflects a paradigm shift from administrative supervision to a collaborative and humanistic professional development model.

These findings reinforce the instructional leadership theory proposed by Mulyasa (2021) and Aslamiah and Cinantya (2023), which states that the principal acts as a learning facilitator who guides and empowers teachers through constructive

supervision. The principal of SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru fosters a reflective culture by building mutual trust between leaders and teachers. This approach also aligns with the concept of transformational leadership described by Leithwood and Jantzi (2005), where leaders strive to foster intrinsic motivation, provide individual attention, and encourage teacher innovation in addressing learning changes.

Furthermore, the implementation of academic supervision at this school reflects the principle of data-driven decision-making as outlined by Suriansyah, Aslamiah, and Cinantya (2022), where improvements in learning quality are based on empirical data. Data from the Education Report Card, ANBK, and Sulingjar serve as the basis for determining the direction of teacher development, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Through this step, supervision goes beyond mere observation and becomes part of evidence-based curriculum management. Teachers experience tangible benefits because the coaching process is participatory, reflective, and supports continuous improvement in learning quality. Therefore, the supervision practice at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru can be considered a leading example of implementing educational quality improvement management at the school level.

Challenges and Solutions in Curriculum Implementation

In implementing the curriculum, principals face various challenges that require adaptive managerial and leadership skills. One of the main obstacles is the differing understandings among teachers regarding the concepts and essence of the curriculum, which results in a lack of synchronization in the classroom learning process. Furthermore, limited time for supervision makes it difficult for principals to monitor and evaluate the curriculum's implementation comprehensively. According to Aslamiah (2023), the effectiveness of curriculum implementation depends heavily on a shared perception and commitment of the entire school community to the desired learning objectives. Therefore, principals need to ensure the existence of professional communication forums and ongoing internal training programs to build a unified vision among teachers and strengthen their pedagogical capacity.

As a strategic solution, principals implement a transformational leadership approach that emphasizes teacher empowerment, creating a shared vision, and enhancing collaboration among stakeholders. This practice aligns with the views of Leithwood and Jantzi (2005), who assert that transformational leadership can foster intrinsic motivation and a sense of collective responsibility in managing educational change. Celia Cinantya (2024) states that the success of curriculum implementation is determined not only by teachers' technical skills but also by a supportive work climate and visionary leadership. By strengthening communication, involving teachers in decision-making, and ensuring individual attention for students facing learning difficulties, principals demonstrate a commitment to creating an inclusive, adaptive, and student-centered learning environment.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that the principal's leadership at SMP Negeri 3 Kotabaru plays a pivotal role in fostering a strong quality culture through the integration of data-based curriculum evaluation and reflective academic supervision. Serving not only as an administrator but also as a visionary and collaborative instructional leader, the principal effectively directs curriculum planning and evaluation using data-driven decision-making aligned with student needs, teacher competencies, and national education priorities. This leadership approach reflects a combination of instructional and transformational leadership, demonstrated through coaching and mentoring practices that encourage teacher self-reflection and create an open, collaborative environment focused on continuous improvement in learning quality. Both formal and informal supervision, including monthly reflection forums, function as platforms for teachers to refine teaching strategies based on shared experiences. The use of data from the Education Report Card, ANBK results, and teacher reflections further strengthens evidence-based decision-making, enabling the school to identify learning challenges and develop adaptive improvement strategies. Despite these strengths, the study identifies persistent challenges such as limited teacher data literacy, constrained time for deep reflection, and varying levels of curriculum understanding. Addressing these issues requires ongoing professional development, strengthened mentoring, and a school climate that supports sustainable learning. Overall, the principal's leadership exemplifies effective, data-informed educational management that promotes empowerment, collaboration, and innovation, ultimately reinforcing teacher professionalism and supporting the implementation of an adaptive curriculum. As a learning leader and agent of change, the principal plays a crucial role in ensuring the realization of quality, relevant, and sustainable education amid the continuing transformation of the education system.

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