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## Exploring Instructional Leadership Practices at Rantau Kiwa 2 Public Elementary School, Tapin Regency: A Qualitative Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigates instructional leadership practices at SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2, Tapin Regency, based on empirical data from in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that instructional leadership at the school is empirically manifested through four interconnected dimensions: collaborative instructional planning, student-centered and innovative instructional implementation, reflective evaluation grounded in learning outcome data, and systematic follow-up through continuous teacher professional development. Observational and interview data indicate that the principal facilitates structured teacher collaboration, conducts instructional supervision, and utilizes evaluation results to design targeted professional learning activities. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is supported by observable practices, including the integration of digital technology, differentiated instruction, and the establishment of professional learning communities. These findings demonstrate that instructional leadership at SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2 operates as a concrete and cyclical set of practices influencing instructional planning, classroom implementation, evaluation, and follow-up within the school context.

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary educational landscape, instructional leadership has become a central discourse in efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. The role of school principals is no longer limited to administrative and managerial functions but increasingly encompasses responsibilities related to guiding instructional processes, supporting teacher professionalism, and fostering a learning-oriented school culture. Instructional leadership emphasizes the

principal's involvement in curriculum planning, classroom supervision, and the use of evaluation data to improve instructional practices. Empirical studies have consistently shown that effective instructional leadership is positively associated with improved teacher performance, instructional quality, and overall school effectiveness (Kamalia et al., 2022; Hardiman et al., 2025). Through instructional leadership, principals are expected to influence teaching practices directly rather than indirectly through policy or administrative control. This shift reflects broader educational reforms that prioritize learning quality, accountability, and continuous improvement in instructional processes.

Despite its recognized importance, the implementation of instructional leadership in Indonesian schools continues to face significant challenges. Many school principals remain predominantly focused on administrative responsibilities, such as managing school finances, infrastructure, and reporting requirements, leaving limited time and attention for instructional supervision. As a result, instructional leadership is often implemented in a fragmented and procedural manner rather than as a sustained leadership practice. This condition weakens the development of reflective and collaborative instructional cultures among teachers. Several empirical studies indicate that weak instructional leadership is associated with lower levels of teacher discipline, motivation, and pedagogical competence, which ultimately affects student learning outcomes (Trihandayani et al., 2025; Nurohman et al., 2025). These findings suggest that instructional leadership has not yet been fully institutionalized as a core leadership function in many schools, particularly at the elementary education level.

The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum further intensifies the urgency of effective instructional leadership. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and continuous reflection on teaching practices (Nor & Suriansyah, 2024; Nababan, 2025). These principles require teachers to adopt innovative pedagogical strategies and adapt instruction to diverse student needs. Consequently, school principals are required to assume proactive instructional leadership roles to support teachers in planning, implementing, and evaluating learning activities (Romdona et al., 2025; Sundari & Pharama, 2021; Tarigan, 2025). Without strong instructional leadership, curriculum reform risks being implemented superficially, focusing on administrative compliance rather than meaningful instructional change. Previous studies highlight that principals play a crucial role in supporting curriculum implementation through supervision, mentoring, and the development of professional learning communities (Ridiyawati et al., 2025; Yenita & Andriani, 2025; Baidowi, 2024). Therefore, instructional leadership becomes a key mechanism for translating curriculum policy into effective classroom practice.

Although numerous studies published in the Journal of Educational Sciences have examined principal leadership in relation to teacher performance, supervision, and school management, most of these studies emphasize leadership outcomes rather than the instructional processes underlying those outcomes. Existing research tends to focus on the effects of leadership on teacher performance or student achievement, with limited attention to how instructional leadership is enacted in daily school

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practices. There remains insufficient empirical evidence on how principals operationalize instructional leadership through specific dimensions such as instructional planning, classroom implementation, evaluation of learning outcomes, and follow-up actions. This limitation is particularly evident in elementary schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, where contextualized and practice-based evidence is still scarce (Daud et al., 2025; Mainussa et al., 2024). As a result, the mechanisms through which instructional leadership influences instructional improvement remain underexplored.

The absence of detailed empirical studies on instructional leadership practices creates a significant research gap. Understanding instructional leadership as a set of observable and contextualized practices is essential for informing leadership development and policy implementation. Without empirical insights into how principals enact instructional leadership in real school contexts, efforts to strengthen leadership capacity risk being based on normative assumptions rather than evidence. This gap underscores the urgency of conducting qualitative, practice-oriented studies that capture the lived experiences of principals and teachers in implementing instructional leadership. Such studies are particularly important in elementary schools, where instructional foundations are critical for long-term student learning development. Therefore, empirical investigation is needed to document how instructional leadership functions as a continuous and integrated process within specific school contexts. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the roles and strategies of the school principal in implementing instructional leadership at SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2, Tapin Regency, focusing on the dimensions of instructional planning, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up actions. This study seeks to provide empirical evidence of how instructional leadership is operationalized in supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary school level.

## **2. Methodology**

### ***Research Design and Participants***

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design to gain an in-depth and contextualized understanding of instructional leadership practices as they occur in a real school setting. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because it allows researchers to explore complex social phenomena, such as leadership practices, within their natural contexts and from the perspectives of multiple participants. The selected case was SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2, an elementary school located in Tapin Regency, Indonesia, which has formally implemented the Merdeka Curriculum since the 2022 academic year. The school was purposively chosen due to its active engagement in curriculum reform and the principal's visible involvement in instructional supervision and teacher development activities, making it a relevant and information-rich case for examining instructional leadership practices.

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The research participants consisted of one school principal and six classroom teachers selected through purposive sampling. The principal was selected based on their formal authority and responsibility as the instructional leader within the school. Classroom teachers were selected using specific inclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and depth of data, including a minimum of five years of teaching experience, active involvement in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, and participation in school-based professional development programs. These criteria were applied to ensure that participants possessed sufficient experience and insight into instructional leadership practices within the school context. The composition of participants enabled the collection of data from both leadership and instructional perspectives, allowing for triangulation of viewpoints. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection to ensure ethical compliance.

### ***Instrument***

In qualitative research, the primary research instrument is the researcher, who plays an active role in data collection, interpretation, and analysis. To support systematic data collection, this study employed several structured qualitative instruments, including a semi-structured interview guide, an observation checklist, and a document analysis protocol. The semi-structured interview guide was developed based on an instructional leadership framework and designed to explore four key dimensions: instructional planning, instructional implementation, evaluation practices, and follow-up actions. Each dimension consisted of four to six open-ended questions, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. This structure ensured that the data collected were both in-depth and comparable across participants.

The observation checklist was designed to capture observable instructional leadership behaviors exhibited by the principal during instructional supervision, teacher meetings, and professional learning activities. Observations focused on leadership actions related to guiding instruction, facilitating collaboration, providing feedback, and supporting teacher professional development. Meanwhile, the document analysis protocol was used to systematically examine relevant school documents, including lesson plans, supervision records, evaluation reports, meeting minutes, and school policy documents related to instructional improvement and curriculum implementation. To ensure instrument validity and clarity, all research instruments were reviewed by two experts in educational leadership prior to field implementation. Feedback from these experts was used to refine question wording, ensure alignment with research objectives, and enhance the credibility of the data collection process.

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period, from March to May 2024, to allow sufficient time for in-depth engagement with the research site and participants. In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face with the principal and selected teachers, with each interview lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All

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interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to explore participants' perspectives in depth while allowing flexibility to probe emerging themes related to instructional leadership practices.

Participatory observations were carried out during various school activities, including classroom supervision sessions, teacher coordination meetings, and professional learning community activities. These observations aimed to capture authentic instructional leadership practices as they naturally occurred within the school environment. Field notes were recorded systematically to document leadership behaviors, interactions, and contextual factors. In addition, relevant documents were collected directly from the school administration and verified for authenticity and relevance. To enhance data credibility, methodological and source triangulation were applied by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Member checking was also conducted by returning interview summaries to participants for verification and clarification, ensuring that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' perspectives.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019), which consists of three interconnected processes: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were first organized and coded using thematic analysis. Initial coding was conducted deductively based on the four dimensions of instructional leadership, followed by inductive coding to identify emerging patterns and sub-themes within each dimension. This iterative coding process enabled the researcher to refine categories and establish meaningful relationships among data sources. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting research procedures and analytical decisions (Rahmah et al., 2025). Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive notes that captured the researcher's assumptions and reflections throughout the research process. These procedures ensured that the findings were grounded in empirical data and that the analytical process was transparent and rigorous.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### ***Results***

This study was conducted at SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2, Tapin Regency, South Kalimantan, an A-accredited elementary school that has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum since 2022. Empirical data were obtained through in-depth interviews

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with one principal and two classroom teachers, classroom and school-based observations, and analysis of instructional documents. The results indicate that instructional leadership practices at the school are enacted through four interrelated dimensions: instructional planning, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up actions. These dimensions are not merely normative expectations but are reflected in observable leadership behaviors and instructional practices.

### ***Instructional Leadership Planning***

Empirical findings show that instructional planning at SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2 is conducted collaboratively and systematically. Observation of curriculum planning meetings revealed that teachers actively contributed ideas during the development of the operational curriculum and teaching modules. The principal explicitly positioned teachers as partners in decision-making processes. As stated by the principal: *“Planning will not work if it is decided only by the principal. Teachers must be involved so they feel responsible for the learning process”* (P1). Teachers confirmed this practice, noting that they were directly involved in aligning lesson plans with the Merdeka Curriculum and students’ learning needs. One teacher stated, *“We are invited to discuss learning objectives and methods, not just asked to follow instructions”* (T1). Document analysis of meeting minutes and curriculum plans further supports this finding, showing documented teacher input in curriculum design. These empirical indications demonstrate that instructional planning is implemented as a shared and participatory process rather than a top-down administrative task.

### ***Instructional Leadership Implementation***

During the implementation phase, observational data show that the principal actively engaged in instructional supervision and classroom monitoring. Classroom observations indicated that the principal conducted scheduled academic supervision at least once per semester and provided direct feedback to teachers after observations. One teacher explained, *“After classroom observation, the principal always gives suggestions that are practical and relevant to our teaching problems”* (T2). The use of digital learning tools such as Google Classroom and Canva was consistently observed across classrooms. Teachers reported that the adoption of these tools was encouraged through internal workshops facilitated by the principal. Additionally, school routines such as *Rabu Literasi* and *Jumat Taqwa* were observed as structured programs embedded in the instructional schedule. These observations indicate that instructional leadership is enacted through concrete actions that directly influence teaching practices, rather than remaining at the policy level.

### ***Instructional Leadership Evaluation***

Evaluation practices at SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2 are data-driven and reflective. Analysis of supervision reports and assessment records shows that the principal systematically uses formative and summative assessment data to evaluate instructional effectiveness. During reflection meetings, teachers are encouraged to

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discuss challenges openly. One teacher noted, “*Evaluation meetings are not about blaming, but about finding solutions together*” (T1). Observation of reflective meetings revealed dialogical interactions where teachers discussed student learning outcomes and identified improvement strategies. This indicates that evaluation functions as a collective learning process. Empirically, evaluation activities were observed to result in concrete instructional adjustments, such as revising lesson strategies and implementing differentiated instruction for students with diverse learning needs.

### ***Instructional Leadership Follow-Up***

Follow-up actions were empirically identified through ongoing professional development activities. Observation data show that the principal initiated internal training sessions, lesson study activities, and peer mentoring. Teachers reported that follow-up actions were consistently linked to evaluation results. As expressed by the principal, “*If evaluation shows weaknesses, we immediately plan training or mentoring*” (P1). Teachers confirmed that these activities strengthened their instructional competence and confidence. Documentation of training schedules and mentoring notes further supports the existence of structured follow-up mechanisms. These findings indicate that instructional leadership at the school operates as a continuous improvement cycle rather than isolated initiatives.

### ***Conceptual Model of Instructional Leadership***

Based on the empirical findings, a conceptual model of instructional leadership was developed (see Figure 1). The model illustrates four interconnected components: collaborative planning, innovative implementation, reflective evaluation, and continuous professional development. The model emphasizes the dynamic interaction between principals and teachers in fostering a reflective and collaborative instructional culture (see Figure 1).

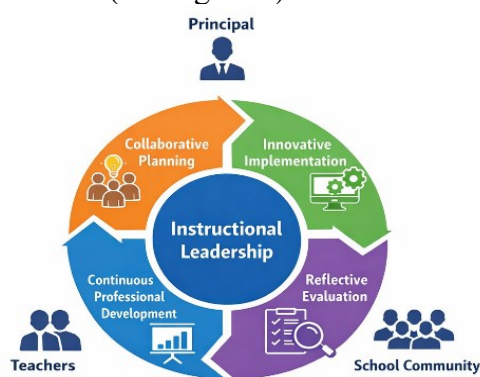


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Instructional Leadership at SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2

Figure 1 presents instructional leadership as a cyclical and integrated process, where each dimension informs and reinforces the others. This model is grounded in observed practices and participant perspectives, rather than normative assumptions, demonstrating how instructional leadership is operationalized in a real school

context. Based on the empirical findings, a conceptual model of instructional leadership was developed to synthesize the observed leadership practices at SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2.

## ***Discussion***

### ***Discussion of Instructional Leadership Planning***

The collaborative instructional planning practices identified in this study reflect key principles of effective instructional leadership. The active involvement of teachers in planning aligns with the concept of distributed leadership, which emphasizes shared responsibility and collective expertise in educational decision-making. Such collaboration strengthens teacher ownership and professional commitment to instructional goals. The findings suggest that instructional planning functions not merely as an administrative requirement but as a professional learning process. This supports previous research highlighting the importance of teacher participation in curriculum development for improving instructional coherence. Collaborative planning also enhances alignment between curriculum objectives and classroom practices. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, this approach enables schools to adapt learning designs to students' contextual needs. Therefore, instructional leadership planning contributes to both instructional quality and organizational capacity.

### ***Discussion of Instructional Leadership Implementation***

The implementation findings demonstrate that instructional leadership plays a critical role in shaping classroom practices through supervision and instructional support. The principal's active engagement in academic supervision aligns with research emphasizing leadership practices that directly influence teaching quality. Feedback-oriented supervision supports teacher reflection and instructional improvement rather than compliance. The integration of digital tools observed in this study indicates adaptive leadership in response to technological demands in contemporary education. Such practices promote student engagement and support learner-centered instruction. The implementation of structured literacy and character programs further reflects leadership attention to holistic student development. These findings reinforce the view that instructional leadership extends beyond managerial tasks. Instead, it functions as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation and instructional coherence.

### ***Discussion of Instructional Leadership Evaluation***

The evaluation practices identified in this study highlight the role of reflective leadership in fostering continuous instructional improvement. Evaluation conducted through collaborative reflection aligns with the concept of assessment for learning, where evaluation informs instructional decision-making. The dialogical nature of evaluation meetings supports professional learning among teachers. This approach contrasts with evaluative practices that focus solely on accountability or performance measurement. The findings suggest that reflective

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evaluation enhances teacher agency and instructional responsiveness. By using assessment data as a basis for discussion, leaders create opportunities for collective problem-solving. Such practices contribute to a culture of trust and professional growth. Consequently, instructional evaluation functions as a developmental rather than judgmental process.

### ***Discussion of Instructional Leadership Follow-Up***

The structured follow-up practices observed in this study underscore the importance of continuous professional development in instructional leadership. Follow-up actions grounded in evaluation findings demonstrate leadership commitment to sustained instructional improvement. Professional development activities such as lesson study and mentoring support collaborative learning among teachers. These practices are consistent with the concept of schools as learning organizations, where continuous learning is embedded in daily practice. The findings indicate that follow-up actions enhance instructional capacity and teacher confidence. Moreover, systematic follow-up ensures that evaluation outcomes lead to tangible instructional changes. This highlights the role of instructional leadership in bridging reflection and action. Effective follow-up thus strengthens the overall instructional improvement cycle.

### ***Discussion of the Conceptual Model***

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 illustrates instructional leadership as an integrated and cyclical process. Unlike linear leadership models, this model emphasizes the continuous interaction among planning, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up. The findings suggest that instructional leadership effectiveness depends on the alignment of these components. The model also highlights the central role of collaboration between principals and teachers. By positioning leadership as a shared and reflective practice, the model extends existing instructional leadership frameworks. It provides an empirical illustration of how leadership is enacted within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. The model contributes to the literature by demonstrating how instructional leadership can be operationalized in elementary school settings. Overall, Figure 1 reinforces the importance of leadership practices that are adaptive, collaborative, and learning-oriented.

## **4. Conclusion**

Based on the theoretical review, research methodology, and empirical findings at SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2, this study concludes that instructional leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of teaching and learning processes. The research demonstrates that the principal's leadership is operationalized through four interconnected dimensions: collaborative instructional planning, innovative implementation, reflective evaluation, and continuous professional follow-up. These practices are empirically observable, manifested in

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structured teacher collaboration, guided classroom supervision, reflective discussions on learning outcomes, and ongoing professional development activities. The success of instructional leadership at SD Negeri Rantau Kiwa 2 is evident in the alignment between curriculum objectives and students' learning needs, the integration of technology into instructional practices, and the creation of a supportive, reflective school culture. Teachers engage in collaborative planning, apply adaptive strategies in classrooms, and use evaluation feedback to improve instruction, while follow-up actions ensure that reflection translates into tangible improvements. These findings indicate that effective instructional leadership is not only a normative expectation but a practical, cyclical process that continuously enhances teacher professionalism and instructional quality. The study highlights the importance of sustained principal-teacher collaboration and offers a conceptual model that can guide the implementation of instructional leadership in other schools, particularly within the Merdeka Curriculum context.

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