

The Role of School Principals in Enhancing Elementary School Graduate Quality: A Comparative Analysis in Cianjur

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Abstract. This study investigates the strategies employed by school principals at SDN Panyindangan and SDN Kertajaya in Cianjur Regency to enhance the quality of elementary school graduates. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research applies the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) framework to examine principals' planning, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up actions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings reveal that leadership strategies are strongly influenced by each school's context, including available resources, teacher competencies, socio-economic conditions, and community engagement. SDN Panyindangan prioritized remedial programs, character and religious development, and parental involvement, while SDN Kertajaya emphasized curriculum innovation, digital literacy, and project-based learning. The systematic application of the PDCA cycle facilitated continuous improvement, while adaptive and collaborative solutions addressed challenges such as limited facilities and variable teacher skills. This study concludes that effective school leadership is context-sensitive and participatory, and that tailored, systematic, and adaptive strategies can significantly improve graduate quality. The results provide practical insights for school leaders, teachers, and policymakers seeking sustainable approaches to enhancing educational outcomes in diverse settings.

Keywords: school principal, leadership strategies, graduate quality, elementary school, PDCA.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Primary education plays a crucial role in developing high-quality human resources (HR), emphasizing the cultivation of skills and character required to face the challenges of the 21st century. According to Mardhiyah et al. (2021), education in this era must be able to integrate technology with human skills, including creativity and ethics [1]. In this context, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is highly relevant, as it supports the development of learning models aligned with contemporary demands, including character education [2].

Education at the primary level not only focuses on cognitive development but also on fostering responsible and faithful character, as mandated in Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System [3]. Learning innovations such as STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) have been recognized as effective in enhancing students' 21st-century skills [4], [5]. With the right approach, primary education can shape a generation that is competent, creative, and adaptable to change [6].

In line with this, Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum introduces the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) as an essential innovation to develop students with strong character, creativity, and critical thinking, as well as collaborative abilities that are adaptive to global diversity and rapid social change [7].

The quality of elementary school graduates in Indonesia still faces significant challenges, as reflected in the Education Report 2022, which revealed that one in two students had not achieved minimum literacy competency and two out of three students had not met the numeracy standards [8], [9]. Data from the National Assessment also indicate that the literacy and numeracy achievements of primary school students remain at a moderate level, suggesting that various educational policies implemented so far have not optimally improved graduate quality [9].

These challenges stem from complex factors, including the lack of teacher training and limited adaptation of curricula to modern demands such as the Merdeka Curriculum, which is expected to address these issues [10]. Programs such as Kampus Mengajar aim to involve university students in helping to improve elementary students' literacy and numeracy skills, thereby enhancing learning outcomes at the basic education level [11], [12]. However, persistent challenges such as limited resources and the lack of innovative teaching methods must still be addressed to improve graduate quality in the future [13], [14].

The gap between educational policies and field realities in Indonesia remains a major obstacle to improving graduate quality, despite the implementation of various programs such as the Merdeka Curriculum and Sekolah Penggerak [15], [16]. The implementation of these policies often does not align with the diverse conditions of schools, where limited infrastructure, low teacher technological competence, and minimal parental support significantly affect their effectiveness [17].

Research highlights the need for evaluation of the impact of educational digitalization policies that aim to reduce inequality but have not consistently yielded the expected results across regions [18]. For example, in remote areas of Indonesia, inequality in

educational infrastructure provision has led to significant quality disparities between urban and rural schools [19], [20]. Strengthening teacher training programs and providing adequate facilities are essential responses to address these gaps [21], [22]. Studies also show that parental involvement in children's education can improve learning outcomes, yet participation rates remain low [22]. Furthermore, teachers' engagement in data collection and the design of character education based on contextual learning remains limited, resulting in incomplete data that fail to comprehensively reflect the implementation and its impact on students [23].

School principals hold a strategic role as managers and instructional leaders who directly influence teacher performance and student learning outcomes. Studies reveal that effective leadership styles significantly enhance teacher performance [24], [25]. As key decision-makers, principals also shape school culture and the quality of the learning process, distinguishing high-performing schools from lower-performing ones [26], [27].

Strong leadership and support from school principals are vital in creating a conducive working environment for teachers [28]. Wahyudi et al. (2020) emphasize that effective instructional leadership from principals can improve student achievement [29]. Moreover, principals' effectiveness in team management and teacher motivation greatly contributes to students' academic success [30]. With the right strategies, principals can transform their schools into institutions that not only focus on academics but also foster character and skills development, thereby improving the overall quality of education [31].

Cianjur Regency, located in West Java Province, features diverse geographical and social characteristics ranging from urban to rural areas, which affects the equity of primary education quality [32]. Differences in socioeconomic conditions and school facilities lead to unequal learning outcomes among schools [33]. In this context, SDN Panyindangan and SDN Kertajaya, two schools within the same policy jurisdiction, demonstrate contrasting graduate quality levels. SDN Panyindangan represents a school with limited resources, while SDN Kertajaya benefits from better facilities and stronger academic achievements. This contrast is worth examining to understand how each principal's leadership strategy influences graduate quality, as well as the supporting and inhibiting factors involved.

1.2 Previous Literature and Research Rationale

A number of previous studies have examined the role of school principal leadership in improving education quality, albeit with different focuses and scopes. Fattah (2019) emphasizes that the main foundation lies in the principal's ability to build a quality culture through effective human resource management [34]. A more specific study by Askan (2022) in Vocational High Schools in Serang City expands this perspective by proving that graduate quality does not only depend on internal leadership but is also significantly strengthened by the active role of the school committee [35]. Meanwhile, in responding to contemporary education policies, Hidayat (2023) found that the effectiveness of school principal leadership, particularly adaptive leadership, is a key factor in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum [36].

Despite existing research on school principal leadership and its impact on education quality, a notable gap persists. These prior investigations often focus on isolated strategic elements or are confined to single institutions with homogenous characteristics. Consequently, a comprehensive and comparative understanding of holistic leadership strategies across diverse real-world educational contexts remains elusive. This research aims to address this deficiency by comparatively examining the strategies employed by school principals in two elementary schools that exhibit contrasting achievement levels and capacities, yet operate within a uniform policy framework.

This research introduces novelty on two distinct levels. Firstly, concerning its methodological approach, this study employs a comparative analysis of two public elementary schools in Cidaun District, Cianjur Regency, exhibiting marked contrasts: SDN Panyindangan, characterized by limited facilities and lower ANBK outcomes, versus SDN Kertajaya, which boasts superior infrastructure and higher ANBK performance. Secondly, regarding its analytical framework, the study utilizes Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle to comprehensively examine principals' strategic actions, encompassing planning, implementation, evaluation, and corrective measures. This synergistic integration of a comparative methodology with the PDCA framework offers a novel perspective, thereby distinguishing this research from prior investigations that often adopted a more fragmented focus.

Based on the identification of the gap and novelty, this research has two main objectives. First, to describe and analyze the strategies of school principals in improving graduate quality at SDN Panyindangan and SDN Kertajaya by applying the PDCA framework. Second, to compare the implementation of these leadership strategies between the low-achieving school and the high-achieving school in order to identify the contextual factors that influence them. The results of this research are expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of PDCA-based education management studies, as well as practical implications in the form of strategic recommendations for school principals, teachers, and local policymakers in formulating contextual and sustainable strategies for improving graduate quality.

2 Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the principals' strategies in improving the quality of elementary school graduates. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore meanings, social processes, and participants' experiences contextually, while observing leadership phenomena in their natural settings [37], [38]. The case study design is appropriate for conducting intensive and contextual analysis of one or more units of study [39], in this case, two elementary schools with different performance outcomes but operating under the same educational policy framework.

The research was conducted at SDN Panyindangan and SDN Kertajaya in Cianjur Regency, West Java, from July to September 2025. Both schools were selected because they demonstrate distinct differences in graduate quality despite being under the same administrative jurisdiction. The participants consisted of two principals, four teachers,

and six students selected through purposive sampling. Informants were chosen based on their direct involvement in teaching, quality improvement programs, and school-level decision-making processes [40]. The purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants who were most knowledgeable and experienced regarding the studied phenomenon [41].

Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the principals' leadership strategies, policies, and practices in improving graduate quality [42]. Observations were carried out to examine classroom activities, supervision practices, and character-building programs, allowing the researcher to gain a direct understanding of leadership practices in the school environment [43]. Document analysis included reviewing school work plans, results from the Computer-Based National Assessment (ANBK), student achievement reports, and meeting minutes to corroborate and strengthen field findings.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which involves three concurrent steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing [41]. Data reduction was conducted by organizing and selecting relevant information in accordance with the study's focus, while data display was presented in thematic narratives and comparative tables between schools. The final step involved drawing conclusions inductively to identify emerging patterns, relationships, and meanings.

To ensure data validity, the study employed source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from principals, teachers, and students, while technique triangulation combined interviews, observations, and document reviews [44]. Member checking was conducted by confirming the interpretations and findings with key informants to ensure accuracy and credibility [45].

3 Results

A. General Overview of the Research Sites

This research was conducted at two public elementary schools located in Cidaun Subdistrict, Cianjur Regency, namely SDN Panyindangan and SDN Kertajaya.

SDN Panyindangan is situated in a rural area where most residents work as farmers and come from lower-middle socioeconomic backgrounds. The school has a relatively small number of students, limited supporting facilities such as libraries and laboratories, and minimal use of digital learning tools. However, strong community ties serve as an asset in encouraging parental involvement in school activities and student character development.

SDN Kertajaya, on the other hand, is located along the main district road, providing easier accessibility. The school has a larger number of students, more complete teaching staff, and broader community support from families with more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Although modern facilities such as laboratories and ICT equipment are still limited, this school excels in accreditation, the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, and the development of project-based learning.

B. Research Findings

The findings reveal that the principals' strategies to improve the quality of graduates in both schools were carried out systematically through planning, implementation, supervision, and follow-up processes. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed thematically. The comparison of findings is summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Comparison of School Principals' Strategies for Improving Graduate Quality

Aspect	SDN Panyindangan	SDN Kertajaya	Source / Field Data
School Context	Rural school; most parents are farmers; limited facilities; strong community cohesion.	Urban-access school; diverse community support; better accessibility and facilities.	Field observation
Strategic Planning	Focused on remedial programs, enrichment for high achievers, and religious character development. The principal stated: <i>"We prioritize discipline and morality before academics."</i>	Emphasized strengthening the <i>Merdeka Curriculum</i> , teacher training, and digital technology integration. A teacher explained: <i>"We regularly join digital literacy workshops to be more innovative."</i>	Principal and teacher interviews
Program Implementation	Highlighted religious routines (Duha prayer), morning literacy, and Scouting to shape students' character. A student said: <i>"We enjoy Scouting because it teaches teamwork."</i>	Implemented project-based learning (PjBL), digital media use, and teacher workshops to enhance creativity. A teacher noted: <i>"Our recycling project made students more active and confident."</i>	Teacher and student interviews
Supervision and Evaluation	Conducted supervision twice a month; focused on KKM achievement, religious attitudes, and extra-curricular participation.	Used ANBK-based evaluation; focused on literacy-numeracy skills, academic and non-academic performance.	Principal interviews, ANBK documents
Follow-up Actions	Conducted remedial and enrichment programs; strengthened parental involvement. A parent stated: <i>"Teachers always inform us when our child's grades drop."</i>	Continued teacher training, deep learning reinforcement, and partnerships with CSR programs and local health centers.	Parent and principal interviews

Aspect	SDN Panyindangan	SDN Kertajaya	Source / Field Data
Challenges	Limited facilities (labs, library, school clinic), uneven teacher ICT skills, and low economic background of families.	Limited modern facilities, some teacher resistance to innovation, and noise disturbances from nearby roads.	Teacher interviews, field observation
Impact on Graduate Quality	Improvement in final exam scores and student discipline; stronger religious and moral character.	Improvement in literacy and numeracy performance; greater engagement and creativity in learning.	Academic reports and graduation data

4 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the principals of SDN Panyindangan and SDN Kertajaya implemented different yet systematic strategies to improve the quality of graduates, as reflected through the four stages of the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) management cycle. These strategies were strongly influenced by contextual factors such as school resources, socio-economic background, and teacher competence, indicating that leadership effectiveness in educational quality improvement is inherently situational and adaptive.

4.1 Strategic Planning for Quality Improvement

The strategic planning stage demonstrated contrasting approaches between the two schools. The principal of SDN Panyindangan emphasized remedial programs, religious formation, and moral discipline as the main priorities, reflecting an adaptive leadership style oriented toward internal capacity and character-based education. Conversely, the principal of SDN Kertajaya focused on strengthening the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, digital integration, and teacher professional development.

This contrast confirms that strategic planning in schools is shaped by local needs and available resources. It aligns with Fattah's (2019) notion that effective principals are those capable of cultivating a quality-oriented culture by optimizing internal human resources. However, this study extends the understanding by showing how resource-constrained schools can still prioritize holistic development through community-based moral education, a dimension less explored in previous research.

4.2 Implementation of Programs and Leadership Practices

At the implementation stage, both principals applied leadership strategies consistent with their contextual realities. SDN Panyindangan focused on religious habituation, literacy programs, and character-building activities such as scouting, creating a moral

foundation and community involvement that compensates for limited facilities. In contrast, SDN Kertajaya employed project-based learning (PjBL), teacher workshops, and digital learning tools to foster creativity and innovation.

These findings resonate with Hidayat (2023), who highlights adaptive leadership as a key factor in the success of the Merdeka Curriculum. However, this study contributes a comparative perspective by illustrating that both moral-religious and innovation-technology approaches can achieve improvement when guided by consistent leadership commitment and community engagement. Thus, leadership effectiveness is not defined by technological advancement alone but by the ability to contextualize innovation within local realities.

4.3 Supervision, Evaluation, and Quality Monitoring

The evaluation and supervision process in both schools followed the "Check" phase of the PDCA cycle. SDN Panyindangan focused on monitoring students' religiosity, discipline, and mastery of basic competencies, while SDN Kertajaya emphasized literacy-numeracy assessments and academic achievement reports. Both principals demonstrated systematic supervision through teacher performance monitoring and student progress tracking. These practices reflect what Deming's PDCA model advocates: continual improvement through data-based evaluation. However, the study reveals a unique contextual adaptation where the evaluation criteria in SDN Panyindangan emphasized socio-religious character indicators rather than standardized academic metrics. This suggests that in rural and resource-limited contexts, the definition of "quality graduates" may extend beyond cognitive performance to include moral and behavioral development.

4.4 Follow-up Actions and Continuous Improvement

In the "Act" phase, both schools developed follow-up programs such as remedial and enrichment activities, but SDN Kertajaya demonstrated greater systematic documentation and data-driven decision-making. Meanwhile, SDN Panyindangan emphasized parental involvement and local community partnerships to sustain student learning support outside school hours. This indicates a differentiated interpretation of the PDCA model: one that is data-based and technical (SDN Kertajaya) and another that is socio-cultural and participatory (SDN Panyindangan). Both models demonstrate contextual excellence, reflecting how continuous improvement can manifest differently across environments.

4.5 Challenges in Implementing Quality Improvement

Both schools faced several obstacles in their quality improvement processes. SDN Panyindangan struggled with infrastructural limitations, low teacher digital literacy, and the socio-economic constraints of students' families. Meanwhile, SDN Kertajaya faced challenges such as teacher resistance to innovation and environmental disruptions due to its urban location. These findings reinforce the view that leadership in education

is not only a matter of managerial competence but also contextual negotiation. Effective school leaders must adapt their strategies to overcome environmental barriers through motivational, participatory, and collaborative approaches.

4.6 Comparative Synthesis and Addressing the Research Gap

The comparative findings bridge the research gap identified in the introduction. Prior studies (for example, Fattah, 2019; Askan, 2022; Hidayat, 2023) have discussed principal leadership in improving education quality, yet they often focused on single institutions or isolated leadership dimensions. This study contributes a holistic and comparative perspective by analyzing two schools operating under the same policy environment but with contrasting capacities and outcomes. By employing the PDCA framework, this research demonstrates how principals dynamically plan, implement, monitor, and refine their strategies according to contextual needs. The novelty lies in uncovering that both schools, despite resource disparities, share a common leadership core: consistency, adaptability, and community engagement, while differing in execution focus (character-based versus innovation-based leadership).

Thus, this study provides both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it expands the application of the PDCA model to the field of educational leadership and school improvement in developing regions. Practically, it offers insights for policymakers and school leaders on how to design context-sensitive strategies that align with local capacities without compromising quality standards.

5 Conclusion

This study examined how principals at SDN Panyindangan and SDN Kertajaya implement strategies to improve graduate quality. Leadership approaches were shaped by each school's context, including resources, teacher competencies, and community support. SDN Panyindangan focused on remedial programs, moral and religious character development, and parental involvement, while SDN Kertajaya emphasized curriculum innovation, digital literacy, and project-based learning. The systematic use of the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle underpinned improvements, with planning tailored to local needs, implementation guided by instructional leadership, evaluation through regular monitoring, and follow-up ensuring continuous enhancement. Both schools faced challenges such as limited facilities and variable teacher skills, which were addressed through adaptive and collaborative strategies. The findings show that effective leadership is context-sensitive and participatory, demonstrating that diverse strategies can successfully improve graduate quality when aligned with school realities. Principals act as change agents and quality leaders, highlighting the importance of tailored, systematic, and adaptive approaches in achieving sustainable educational outcomes.

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