

School Principals' Instructional Leadership in Enhancing Learning Quality at Elementary Schools in Balikpapan City

Awaluddin Hidayatulloh^{1*}, Suyatno Suyatno², and Ika Maryani³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Indonesia

*awaluddinhidayatullohuad@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received May 15, 2026

Revised June 30, 2026

Accepted July 18, 2026

Keywords: Instructional Leadership, Elementary School Principals, IKN Buffer Regions

ABSTRACT

The relocation of Indonesia's capital to Nusantara (IKN) in East Kalimantan places surrounding buffer regions, particularly Balikpapan, in a strategic position to provide primary education services that are adaptive to social change and national development. This study aims to analyze the instructional leadership of elementary school principals in IKN buffer areas from the perspective of an education researcher. Employing a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design, the research draws on in-depth interviews with a school principal, teachers, a school supervisor, and school committee members, all of whom have extensive experience in primary and secondary education. The findings indicate that ideal instructional leadership encompasses human resource development, academic strengthening, administrative governance, facilities and infrastructure management, and school financing, all supported by integrity, communication, and collaboration. Within the IKN buffer context, leadership demonstrates characteristics of glocal leadership, grounded in local values while remaining responsive to global demands. The study also reveals that leadership practices that remain predominantly administrative require strengthening through the integration of instructional and transformational leadership, enabling educational visions and values to be effectively enacted in classroom practice. Overall, the research underscores the importance of reinforcing contextual and adaptive leadership capacity among school principals to enhance the quality of primary education in IKN buffer regions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relocation of the National Capital (IKN) to East Kalimantan Province is a national strategic policy that has a wide-ranging impact on regional governance and public services, including the education sector (Purba et al., 2023; Saraswati & Adi, 2022). The designation of the area between North Penajam Paser Regency and Kutai Kartanegara Regency as the new government center places the buffer zone in a crucial position to ensure the sustainability of the IKN's functions. Balikpapan City, as the main buffer, has relatively better infrastructure and public services readiness, and plays a strategic gateway role in development, including in the provision of educational services (Negara, 2020). Normatively, buffer areas are expected to provide quality basic education services that are adaptive to the dynamics of development. However, in fact, the increase in migration flows, the limited capacity of public schools, and the uneven distribution of educational human resources present serious challenges in maintaining the quality of basic education services. These conditions place the leadership of the school principal as a strategic factor. Elementary schools play a fundamental role in shaping the character and basic competencies of students amidst rapid social changes due to the development of the IKN. School principals are no longer merely administrative managers but are required to become learning leaders who can effectively and adaptively direct school resources (Wicaksono et al., 2024).

In this framework, instructional leadership becomes a relevant approach because it is directly oriented toward improving the quality of learning. Research shows that strong instructional leadership can strengthen the school vision, enhance teacher professionalism, and create a conducive learning climate (Juniar et al., 2024). However, in the context of regions experiencing accelerated development like Balikpapan, the complexity of leadership increases as it must bridge national policies, local needs, and continuously evolving social dynamics. Empirically, the management of educational human resources in the buffer zone of the IKN still faces structural and non-technical constraints, including limited facilities and infrastructure. Although the local government has encouraged the improvement of teacher competencies, the distribution of quality educators is still uneven (Yudi et al., 2022). Conceptually, educational leadership is the process of influencing and mobilizing all elements of education to achieve school goals effectively (Nisa, 2025). Visionary and adaptive leaders will be more capable of building an innovative and collaborative school climate (Munir et al., 2025). (Rohmatillah & Arifin, 2025) emphasize that school principals play a role as visionary and collaborative learning leaders thru coaching, supervision, and facilitating teacher innovation. These findings are reinforced by (Tasirun et al., 2025), which show that instructional leadership contributes to building an inclusive school culture thru the strengthening of communication, collaboration, and resource management, although challenges in the internalization of vision and learning innovation are still present. Instructional leadership has a direct relationship with teacher performance because it focuses on the implementation of the school's vision and mission in the learning process (Qadach et al., 2020; Shava & Heystek, 2021).

If instructional leadership is less than optimal, then the improvement of learning quality is difficult to achieve; conversely, strong leadership will have a positive impact on the quality of education (Aslam et al., 2022). The effectiveness is also determined by the managerial ability of the school principal in designing strategies, coordinating resources, and conducting continuous evaluations (Mukti et al., 2026; Pragista et al., 2026; W. Siregar & Hasibuan, 2025). On the other hand, the implementation of educational management at the regional level often faces policy, social, and economic challenges that require adaptive and strategic leadership (Efendi & Sholeh, 2023). Excellent schools are characterized by strong leadership, high expectations for student achievement, and a conducive school climate (Febriansyah et al., 2023). Although various studies have emphasized the importance of instructional leadership in improving school quality, research specifically examining the instructional leadership of elementary school principals in the IKN buffer zone, particularly from the perspective of educational researchers, is still scarce. Several studies tend to focus on the secondary education level or on macro policy aspects of regional development, so the dynamics of leadership at the elementary school level in the local context of the IKN buffer zone have not been deeply depicted. Therefore, a more contextual study is needed to understand how instructional leadership is implemented and directed amidst social transformation and strategic development, so that it can provide both conceptual and practical contributions to strengthening the quality of primary education in the IKN buffer zone. This study differs from previous research by presenting a contextual interpretation of instructional leadership within the dynamics of social transformation in the IKN buffer zone.

2. METHODS

2.1 Type and Research Approach

This research uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design (Dumez, 2015; Thomas, 2021) to deeply understand the instructional leadership of elementary school principals in the buffer zone of the Nusantara Capital City from the perspective of educational researchers. The case study approach was chosen because it allows researchers to examine a

phenomenon contextually in real life, especially when the boundary between the phenomenon and its environment is not clearly defined. Yin (2011) explains that a case study is a research strategy used to deeply investigate an actual phenomenon, particularly when the context and the research object are intertwined. Comprehensively, case studies also aim to obtain a complete understanding of the research subject thru detailed and in-depth information gathering (Rahardjo & Gudnanto, 2022).

2.2 Research Informants

This research was conducted in the buffer zone of the IKN, specifically in the city of Balikpapan, East Kalimantan. Data were obtained thru in-depth interviews with 4 informants consisting of a school principal, teachers, supervisors, and a school committee, selected using purposive sampling technique (Ames et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2020). They were selected because this technique is used as the researcher needs informants who possess key information and relevant competencies related to the research focus (Sulistiyo, 2023). With that background, the informants are considered to have the academic authority and depth of perspective necessary to provide a comprehensive understanding of the instructional leadership of elementary school principals in the buffer zone of the IKN. 2.3 Data Collection Techniques and Instruments Data collection was conducted thru semi-structured interviews (Al-Samarraie et al., 2013; Newcomer et al., 2015), which provide flexibility for researchers to ask key questions while also exploring additional information based on the informants' responses (Fadli, 2024). The interview process was recorded with the informants' consent and supplemented with documentation studies of relevant scientific literature and educational policy documents to enrich the context of the analysis. In conducting the interviews, the researchers adhered to the data collection guidelines developed in accordance with the theory of instructional leadership for school principals. Some interview questions are: How does the principal perform their role as an instructional leader in improving the quality of learning in elementary schools? How does the principal perform their role as an instructional leader in improving the quality of learning in elementary schools?; What programs or policies does the principal implement to support the readiness of elementary schools in the buffer zone of the Nusantara Capital City? And How does the principal nurture and motivate teachers to adapt learning to the developments in education in the era of the Nusantara Capital City?; What are the challenges and obstacles faced by the principal in implementing instructional leadership in the buffer zone of the Nusantara Capital City?

2.4 Analysis and validity of research data

Data analysis is conducted thru the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The interview data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into main themes, then analyzed thematically with theoretical triangulation to enhance the validity of the findings. In this study, the researcher acts as the primary instrument who interprets the data reflectively and contextually (Sutton, J., & Austin, 2015). This research does not aim to generalize findings statistically, but rather to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of instructional leadership in the context of the IKN buffer zone as a conceptual and contextual contribution to the development of educational leadership studies. The validity of the data is ensured thru source triangulation. The results of interviews between research sources are compared to produce an accurate conclusion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

3.1 Ideal Concept of Elementary School Leadership

Based on the interview results, the ideal concept of elementary school principal leadership includes five main aspects: development of human resources for teachers and educational staff, academic development, administrative management, development of facilities and infrastructure, and school financing management. These findings indicate that instructional leadership cannot be separated from the overall managerial capacity and governance of the school. The informants emphasized that school principals have a strategic role in determining the quality of education in the educational units they lead, especially in the context of the buffer zones of the National Capital City (IKN) that are experiencing social changes due to national development. Schools are positioned as the frontline in meeting the basic educational needs of the community, so the success of leadership is greatly determined by integrity (quality, honesty, and discipline), as well as the ability to communicate and collaborate with educational stakeholders. The ideal leadership of an elementary school principal is one who understands the development of human resources for teachers and educational staff, academic development, administrative management, the development of school facilities and infrastructure, and school financing. Then, the aspects that determine the principal's leadership are the quality, honesty, and discipline of the principal, as well as effective communication and collaboration with educational stakeholders in the area. These findings indicate that effective instructional leadership is not only oriented toward the learning process but also toward the quality of the leader's character and the capacity to build collaborative work networks.

3.2 Characteristics of Leadership in the IKN Buffer Zone

In the context of the IKN buffer zone, informants emphasize the need for school principals who possess leadership, managerial, social, and resilience skills in leading excellent educational institutions. The development of the IKN is considered to have a significant impact on school leadership and management patterns, given that this area will evolve according to Indonesia's global needs. The characteristics of elementary school principals' leadership in the buffer zone of the Nusantara Capital City (IKN) include the need for principals who possess leadership, managerial, social, entrepreneurial, and resilience skills to lead an excellent Educational Institution in accordance with IKN's needs. One of the main challenges identified is the demand for a global perspective. Principals in the buffer zone of the Nusantara Capital City (IKN) are viewed as "Indonesia's showcase to the world," thus they are not only required to understand the local context but also to adapt to global standards and dynamics. In this case, collaboration competence and foreign language communication skills become additional relevant needs. The main challenge faced by elementary school principals in the IKN buffer zone compared to other regions is that these principals are required to have a global perspective in leading educational institutions because they serve as Indonesia's showcase to the world. Research data shows that instructional leadership in the IKN buffer zone has contextual characteristics that combine local orientation with global readiness (glocal leadership). These characteristics set it apart from school leadership in regions that are relatively stable socially and in terms of development, as school principals in buffer zones are required to respond to the rapid changes brought about by national development. Leadership in this context not only emphasizes the internal management of the school but also the readiness of educational institutions to respond to global demands without losing their local value roots.

3.3 Leadership Practices and Relevant Models

Informants assess that the current leadership practices of elementary school principals are "not very encouraging" because they still tend to focus solely on administrative fulfillment. This

condition indicates a shift in the role of the principal from a learning leader to an administrative manager, which has the potential to reduce the effectiveness of instructional leadership. As an alternative, the informants recommend a transformational leadership model. This model emphasizes three main points: (1) the principal has a strong educational philosophy and understands the noble values of the nation; (2) able to explicitly translate it into the school's vision, mission, and goals; and (3) able to implement it in learning practices. In my opinion, the most relevant leadership model to be applied in elementary schools in the buffer zone of the IKN can start from three main points. The first is transformational, meaning that the elementary school principal who has an educational philosophy, especially in Indonesia, understands the noble values of the Indonesian nation. Secondly, they must be able to articulate it verbatim in the vision, mission, and goals of the school they lead. And thirdly, they must be able to implement it in the school's learning process. In addition, school principals are also required to formulate educational policies based on the local wisdom of their regions, so that national policies can be adapted to the needs of the learners. Thus, instructional leadership does not stand alone, but is integrated with visionary and contextual transformational leadership.

3.4 Policy Implications and Leadership Development

From a policy perspective, informants emphasize the importance of preparing school principals who possess a balance of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual competencies. This shows that strengthening leadership is not only based on technical competencies but also on integrity and personal maturity. Capacity development recommendations include strengthening the concepts of education and learning, understanding child development stages and play stages, mastery of information technology, and foreign language proficiency. In the context of the IKN buffer zone, these competencies are relevant to meet the educational needs that are adaptive to global changes. A principal must possess a balanced intellectual, emotional, and spiritual competence. I try to recommend capacity development and leadership training for elementary school principals that includes: Educational concepts, learning concepts, stages of child development, stages of children's play, the 11 systems of the human body, information technology, and foreign languages. Furthermore, collaboration between research institutions, local governments, and educational units is necessary to strengthen school leadership. Research institutions serve as training partners, local governments as training facilitators, and educational units as the subjects of training. Collaboration between research institutions, local governments, and educational units is also considered important. Research institutions act as evidence-based training partners, local governments as policy and program facilitators, and educational units as implementers and recipients of training. This pattern of collaboration demonstrates the importance of a systemic approach in strengthening instructional leadership.

3.5 Reflection and Development Direction

Informants hope that school principals in the buffer zone of the IKN have a strong sense of nationalism and global perspective, and are able to distribute these into all aspects of education. My hope for the future of primary education leadership, especially in the buffer zone of the IKN, is that school principals should have a strong and rooted sense of nationalism and global perspective that is diffused into all aspects of education. Not only that, there is a need for the development of competent educational human resources and educational infrastructure. In addition, data analysis also shows that for the informants of this study, education is viewed as the spirit of the nation's progress; without strong education, physical development will lose its strategic meaning. Education is the spirit of a nation's progress; without education, physical development will be hollow, and the nation will be easily co-opted by other nations. The principal must be able to design the school to face those

challenges. For the informants, the development of educational human resources and the strengthening of facilities and infrastructure are necessary preparations for readiness as a supporting city for the capital city. This indicates that instructional leadership needs to be supported by an adequate system in order to function optimally.

DISCUSSION

This research aims to explore the instructional leadership of school principals in realizing quality learning in elementary schools in Balikpapan City. The research results show that the ideal instructional leadership of school principals includes human resource development, academic strengthening, administrative governance, infrastructure management, and school financing management supported by integrity, communication, and collaboration. In the context of the IKN buffer zone, leadership has the characteristic of glocal leadership, which is rooted in local values while being responsive to global demands. The findings also indicate that leadership practices still oriented toward administrative functions require strengthening thru the integration of instructional and transformational leadership so that educational vision and values can be effectively implemented in learning practices. Unlike most previous studies that position instructional leadership primarily as a mechanism for improving the quality of learning thru academic supervision and teacher professional development, this research shows that in the context of the IKN buffer zone, instructional leadership has evolved into a leadership that is required to simultaneously integrate academic, managerial, social, and external networking functions. These findings indicate that the context of national strategic area development creates more complex leadership demands compared to elementary schools in general, as school principals are not only responsible for the quality of learning but also for the institution's readiness to face the social, economic, and cultural changes accompanying the development of the IKN. The ideal instructional leadership of school principals includes human resource development, academic strengthening, administrative governance, infrastructure management, and school financing management, supported by integrity, communication, and collaboration. The findings of this study align with (Siregar et al., 2025), which emphasizes that instructional leadership provides a systematic framework in learning management thru pedagogical supervision, curriculum strengthening, and quality control of instruction. The five aspects of elementary school principal leadership identified in this study—human resource development, academic development, administrative management, infrastructure development, and financial management—show that instructional leadership does not stand alone, but is integrated with managerial capacity and overall school governance.

This integration shows that the boundary between instructional leadership and managerial leadership is becoming increasingly fluid. In the context of this research, leadership is not only determined by the ability to supervise the learning process but also by the ability to manage organizational resources so that the entire school system supports the improvement of learning quality. Thus, this research expands the understanding of instructional leadership, which has so far been viewed more as an academic supervision practice toward a more systemic and contextual perspective. Emphasis on integrity, communication, and collaboration also reinforces the importance of integrating instructional and transformational leadership in building a work climate that is humanistic and oriented toward a shared vision. In this regard, the principal acts as a learning leader who not only manages the learning and professional development of teachers but also fosters a collaborative, innovative, and adaptive learning culture in response to external dynamics, thereby making the ideal principal's leadership a representation of value-based leadership and commitment to sustainable learning transformation. These findings align with the views of (Nufus et al., 2024), which emphasize the importance of visionary leadership in improving the quality of education as a pillar of national development. The demand for school principals with leadership, managerial, social,

and institutional resilience skills reflects the need for leaders who can adaptively formulate the school's vision and mission, create a conducive learning environment, and promote innovation and the strengthening of human resource competencies (Ariyani et al., 2021). In the framework of glocal leadership, the integration of transformational, instructional, and collaborative leadership appears as a cohesive unit that complements each other: transformational leadership plays a role in building the vision and resilience of the school, instructional leadership ensures the maintenance of academic quality, while collaborative leadership strengthens networks and strategic partnerships, including cross-cultural communication and foreign languages. Thus, the leadership of school principals in the IKN buffer zone represents a contextual integrated leadership model in addressing local and global challenges simultaneously.

In this study, glocal leadership is not understood as the ability of school principals to balance the integration of local identity with global education standards. The local dimension is reflected thru the strengthening of community cultural values, interpersonal communication, involvement of the school committee, and decision-making that is sensitive to the characteristics of Balikpapan's environment as a buffer zone for the IKN. Meanwhile, the global dimension is evident in the demands for mastery of digital technology, the ability to build cross-institutional collaboration networks, orientation toward learning innovation, improvement of teacher competencies, and readiness to face educational changes influenced by global developments. These findings show that school principals in the IKN buffer zone are required to be leaders who can maintain a balance between preserving local values and being ready to face global transformations. Thus, the concept of glocal leadership produced by this research offers a new perspective on school leadership in the national strategic development area. In line with these findings, the research (Primasary & Syamsudin, 2023) shows that the transformational and instructional leadership of school principals has been proven to influence the improvement of graduate quality. The leadership patterns displayed thru exemplary behavior, effective communication, motivation, and facilitation of teacher innovation reflect the successful integration of both leadership models in school practice (Ghamrawi et al., 2024; Sliwka et al., 2024). Thus, the results of this study affirm that instructional leadership will be more effective when combined with contextual transformational leadership, grounded in values, and responsive to the needs of students and the dynamics of the school environment. Although previous research has shown the importance of integrating transformational and instructional leadership, this study found that the context of the IKN buffer zone provides an additional dimension in the form of the need to build adaptive capacity to rapidly changing external environmental conditions. This aspect has not been extensively discussed in previous research, which is generally conducted in schools with relatively stable environments. The difference is likely due to the characteristics of the IKN buffer zone, which is experiencing accelerated infrastructure development, population mobility, and increasing expectations regarding the quality of education. These conditions require school principals to not only manage learning but also to manage organizational change sustainably. The concept of glocal leadership as a finding of this research is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Dimensions of glocal leadership

Instructional leadership of school principals in the IKN buffer zone Overall, the results of this study indicate that the instructional leadership of elementary school principals in the IKN buffer zone is not only required to improve the quality of learning but also to act as agents of social transformation amidst national strategic development. The research results affirm that adaptive, visionary, and integrity-driven leadership are the main prerequisites in ensuring that primary education can contribute to the sustainability of the development of the Nusantara Capital City. Theoretically, the results of this research indicate that instructional leadership in the context of strategic area development is no longer adequate if understood solely as a model of leadership oriented toward academic supervision. The research findings indicate the need for the development of an integrated leadership model that combines instructional, transformational, collaborative, and glocal leadership dimensions as a conceptual unity. Practically, the results of this research provide implications for local governments, education offices, and school head development institutions to design leadership competency strengthening programs that not only emphasize school administration aspects but also the development of adaptive, collaborative, and learning-oriented leadership in facing the transformation of the IKN area.

4. CONCLUSION

This research shows that the instructional leadership of elementary school principals in the buffer zone of the new capital has a strategic role in ensuring the quality of basic education is maintained amidst social changes due to the development of the new capital. The concept of ideal leadership not only encompasses technical skills in managing learning but also integrity, communication skills, and collaboration across stakeholders. In the context of a dynamic buffer zone, school principals are required to possess the character of glocal leadership, meaning they must understand local values while also adapting to global standards. The findings also reveal that current leadership practices are still dominated by an administrative orientation, necessitating the strengthening of transformational leadership models to restore the role of school principals as learning leaders. The integration of instructional and transformational leadership has proven to be a relevant approach to improving the quality of learning, teacher professionalism, and graduate quality, as supported by previous research findings. Therefore, the development of school principals' capacities needs to be focused on strengthening educational concepts, pedagogical competencies, technological abilities, and foreign language proficiency. This study emphasizes that adaptive, visionary, and integrity-based instructional leadership is a primary prerequisite for basic education in the IKN buffer zone to significantly contribute to the sustainability of national development. This study has three limitations. First, the research was conducted in elementary schools in Balikpapan City, so the leadership characteristics found may not necessarily represent the entire buffer zone of the IKN. Second, the limited number of informants causes the research results to emphasize depth of exploration rather than generalization of findings. Third, this study uses a qualitative approach, so it has not yet empirically measured the relationship between instructional leadership, glocal leadership, and the improvement of learning quality thru quantitative analysis. Subsequent research is recommended to develop the glocal leadership model more comprehensively thru a mixed methods approach or quantitative research involving a larger number of schools across the IKN region. Additionally, future research can examine the influence of glocal leadership on the quality of learning, teacher innovation, school culture, and student learning outcomes, so that the conceptual model produced in this study can be empirically tested.

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