

Research Article

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Author for correspondence:

Arif Hidayad

✉ arifhidayad.2022@student.uny.ac.id

✉ Yogyakarta State University, Indonesia

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What does the principal do to improve the reading skills of lower-grade students? Case Studies in Elementary Schools in Indonesia

Arif Hidayad , Anik Ghufroon , Kana Hidayati , Christiana Niken Larasati , Suratman , L.Hasan Ashari

Abstract

Background. Many school principals face challenges in carrying out effective leadership in managing schools, which impacts teachers' creativity in teaching and student learning achievement. Research on the efforts of school principals in improving students' reading ability in elementary schools is still limited. Therefore, this study specifically aims to explore the leadership practices of principals in elementary schools in Indonesia that have successfully shown significant improvements in the reading ability of lower-grade students.

Materials/methods. The case study method was carried out through structured interviews and document studies on 6 learning facilitators (Fasda) who have assisted 11 elementary schools in Bima Regency, West Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. The interview was conducted to explore information about the facilitator's experience in accompanying the principal, which had an impact on improving students' reading ability in the lower grades. The data were analysed using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics.

Results. The study results show that school principals have done many things to improve the reading ability of low-grade students, such as adjusting school policies and innovations, collaborating with various parties, conducting teacher training on learning methods, and allocating special funds to improve teacher resources and learning spaces.

Conclusion. This research shows that school principals' leadership has a central role in improving the quality of student learning and literacy. The principal succeeded in formulating strategic policies through the formation of literacy teams, classroom innovation, and collaboration with various parties. This policy creates a learning ecosystem that supports the development of teachers' teaching skills and students' reading skills.

1. Introduction

Good literacy skills will have a positive impact on a person's life. It is difficult for a person to develop their potential if their literacy skills are very minimal. A person's literacy skills will be good when equipped with basic literacy skills, such as reading skills. Reading skills are not limited only to the ability to spell words or pronounce sentences; the most important thing is the ability to understand what is read, seen, or listened to so that they can build knowledge independently. The knowledge and insights gained become provisions for doing something useful for him. Therefore, good reading skills must be habituated in a person from an early age to build knowledge and insights that support every decision. Basic literacy skills, especially reading, are the main foundation in the student learning process and are an important indicator in assessing the quality of a country's education system. Strong literacy not only supports students' academic achievement but also influences the development of critical thinking, communication skills, and readiness to face the challenges of the 21st century.

However, the results of international studies show that the literacy ability of Indonesian students is still relatively low. The PISA 2022 report noted that only 25% of Indonesian students can reach Level 2 or higher in reading, far below the OECD average of 74% (OECD, 2023). This means that most students do not yet have the basic skills to understand explicit information in the text, identify key ideas, or reflect on the form and purpose of the text. This condition reflects a serious gap in literacy learning practices at the elementary school level, especially in early grades. Previous studies have highlighted the weakness of students' reading skills, but not many have delved deeply into principals' managerial and leadership role in encouraging positive change in schools. School principals' leadership is key in creating a supportive learning environment, increasing teacher capacity, and implementing strategic school policies (Barber, 2020; Liu & Hallinger, 2018).

In addition, many literacy programs still emphasise a uniform one-way approach for all students, without taking into account the diversity of reading ability, local context, or affective aspects of students. In fact, learning approaches such as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) which are differentiated and based on initial assessments have proven to be more effective in encouraging the development of student literacy, especially at the early stages of basic education (Shaughnessy & Boerst, 2018).

Thus, this research is needed to fill the gap, namely by identifying and analysing in depth how school principals design policies, initiate collaboration, and encourage learning innovations that have an impact on improving students' reading skills. This study specifically aims to explore the leadership practices of principals in elementary schools in Indonesia that have successfully shown significant improvements in the reading ability of early-grade students.

The findings of this study are expected to make a practical contribution to the development of literacy education policies at the school and regional levels, as well as offer a strategic framework for principals and teachers in designing data-based, contextual, and participatory learning interventions. From the academic side, this research also enriches the literature review on the relationship between school leadership and student learning outcomes, especially in the context of developing countries such as in Indonesia.

2. Literature review

2.1. Reading Skill

The availability of supporting factors greatly influences students' reading ability. In line with this, several factors affect the low effective reading ability of students in elementary school, such as lack of access to reading materials, lack of teacher training on proper reading teaching methods, and lack of use of effective learning strategies (Thiel, M., & Effenberger, 2019). One of the strategies to

improve students' reading ability is to prepare reading materials that use the mother tongue (Guzmán, 2021). Reading skills can be built through confidence and a happy attitude during learning. This statement is in line with the statement that, in reading, it is necessary to cultivate students' affective and cognitive aspects (McGeown et al., 2015). In another article, it is also mentioned that in addition to the sense of student confidence that must be built, schools must also prepare reading access for students, such as classroom libraries, and be supported by clear and effective instructions from teachers on how students should learn (Gao et al., 2022). Therefore, in improving students' reading skills, schools should pay attention to the capacity of teachers who teach and strive to increase access to reading materials for students.

Other research results state that teachers and schools only focus on obtaining standard reading scores for students, so many students feel pressured while studying. Students are only prepared to face the final exam and obtain grades (Nicholas et al., 2021). As a result of the practice and learning process that is still wrong, students are reluctant to read and develop their potential (Budiharto et al., 2018).

2.2. Building Professionalism and Teacher Leadership in Teaching

On the teacher's side, the teacher's leadership and professionalism in learning must be owned by them, especially in the era of education reform, which is constantly changing all the time. Therefore, developing teacher professionalism and leadership in stages is important, and school principals must schedule it (Poekert, 2016). Teachers should be given regular training and mentoring, for example, on how to develop teaching materials. In addition, through the principal's instruction, teachers should create a learning community to increase cooperation between teachers, so that student learning achievement also increases (Hallam et al., 2015). During learning, teachers must make students their learning partners so that a learning process jointly involves both parties (Healey et al., 2016). In addition, teachers must also be able to take advantage of technological developments; the emergence of social media can be used as a learning medium by teachers in improving students' reading skills, and teachers can use videos for students with special needs (Momani, 2020; Ok & Howorth, 2022).

Professional teachers are very supportive of how to teach. Therefore, teachers should continue to be facilitated to learn, especially in aspects of teaching strategies, understanding the context in which they work, and how they can explore what they have succeeded in doing (Kim et al., 2019). Coaching and training for teachers must be the center of attention of the government and schools to build teacher capacity so that they can interpret student learning outcomes data (Huguet et al., 2014). Training and mentoring play an important role in teachers imparting their knowledge and competencies to have a better future (Tican & Deniz, 2019). If so, then elementary school students' low reading literacy ability can be overcome.

2.3. Principal Leadership

A school principal is the main actor in changing school conditions for the better. Especially the role of the principal as a policymaker and the teacher as a learning facilitator is the main thing because it will have implications for student learning achievement (Barber, 2020; Toprak, 2020). The leadership attitude of the principal both inside and outside the school can have implications for teachers, students, and the health of the organisation. This is in line with the opinion that the behaviour of the principal has a relationship with student learning achievement, teacher teaching practice, teacher welfare, and organisational welfare (Handayani & Rasyid, 2015; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Tan, 2018; Wardany, 2020). A school principal must have a forward-thinking paradigm and be willing to change and foster the people around them. This must be done continuously to have a proper leadership attitude (Daresh & Alexander, 2015). The results of previous research stated that the problem that still occurs in Indonesia is the weak leadership of school principals in managing their

schools (Sofa et al., 2012). As a result of this, there is a decrease in teacher performance in their school because the principal is not optimal in carrying out his supervisory function and motivating teachers to think more openly and develop (Budiman & Saleh, 2020; Madjid & Samsudin, 2021). In several countries, such as China, research results have shown that there is a direct and indirect influence between the leadership of the principal and self-efficacy on the professionalism of teachers (Liu & Hallinger, 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative approach with a case study method is used in this study. Through structured interviews and document studies, information about several cases within a certain limit will be explored using various data sources such as interviews, observations, document studies, and other artifacts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring in depth and contextually a complex phenomenon, namely the leadership practice of school principals in improving the reading literacy skills of early-grade students. Case studies allow researchers to understand holistically the dynamics that occur in the context of primary schools, with a focus on the interactions between principals, facilitators, and policies implemented. The case study method was chosen because it provides space for in-depth exploration of several cases through various data sources, such as in-depth interviews, observations, document studies, and other supporting artifacts. This approach is considered most appropriate because the purpose of the research is not to generalise the findings, but to understand the meaning, strategies, and impacts of literacy policies at the elementary school level in a contextual manner (Yazan, 2015).

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

The data of this research was obtained from the results of interviews and document studies with school assistants, or what is referred to as regional facilitators (Fasda), learning and direct observation of the target schools. Fasda is a school assistant appointed by the Education Office to assist several target schools designated as target schools. A special team selects Fasda to recruit competent Fasda who have experience as local and national tutors, and with a minimum qualification of a master's degree for lecturers and a minimum bachelor's degree for supervisors, principals, and teachers. The number of appointed Fasda is 6 people who will accompany 11 target schools. In detail, it can be illustrated in the following table 1:

Table 1. Fasda demographic and target schools

Variable	Criterion	Total
Fasda	Man	4
	Woman	2
Fasda's identity	Supervisor	1
	Principal	1
	Lecturer	3
	Teacher	1
Fasda's qualification	Bachelor	1
	Master	4
	Doctor	1
Target School	Country	9
	Private	2

From Table 1 above, it can be seen that there are more male Fasda than female Fasda, with 50% of Fasda having an identity as a lecturer, while the rest have supervisors, principals, and senior teachers. Regarding qualifications, there are 4 Fasda with master's degrees in education, while others

have doctoral degrees in education and a Bachelor of Education. The target schools are dominated by public schools under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture, while the remaining 2 schools are madrasas under the Ministry of Religion.

The six Fasda were interviewed in depth and structured related to the material and the results of the assistance provided to the target schools. Armed with a permit from the district education office and the research institution of the researcher's home university, the interview took place separately at a different place and time, because it was adjusted to their leisure and opportunities. The interview instruments were developed through discussion groups between the education office, school supervisors, and academics concerned with the educational evaluation field. The discussion results produced four core indicators that became the focus of the interview, which were then developed into eight core questions simultaneously validated by the discussion team. The interview questions focused more on the mentoring material by the Fasda, the principal's efforts in improving the reading literacy of its citizens, the support and obstacles experienced by the principal, and the innovations made by the principal. Meanwhile, the document study was carried out to collect data on students' reading and learning outcomes in 11 target schools, as well as several materials and teaching materials used during the teaching and learning process. For the validity of the data, a source triangulation process is carried out, namely, direct observation of the target school, especially checking the suitability of documents from the Fasda and the principal.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis that has been collected is adjusted to the data type, namely interview transcripts with 11 school principals and documents on the results of student reading ability assessments (baseline, midline, endline). Interview transcript analysis using Atlas.ti software version 23 with steps to familiarise data, code data, develop themes, and review and define themes (Setiawan, 2022). For document data, students' reading skills were analysed using descriptive statistics, illustrating the progress made in improving students' reading skills at each reading level.

Interview transcript data is analysed using thematic analysis with steps to familiarise yourself with the data, recognise the theme, code the data, develop the theme, review, and define the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the step of identifying the theme, the researcher conducts analytical work such as observing the ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisation of Fasda experiences related to the mentoring process carried out with school principals and teachers. In the step of coding data or information from Fasda is carried out deductively and inductively so that the theoretical construction of the various information conveyed can be strictly held during the analysis activities (Miles et al., 2019). Furthermore, the step of developing or constructing a theme comes from the results of coding on each small theme so that it becomes a big theme or becomes a clustered pattern of meaning (Terry et al., 2017). Finally, the theme is reviewed and defined, namely, the specified theme candidates are reviewed, and then the theme is redefined. This analysis activity is carried out with the research team through regular weekly meetings to compare, review, and investigate the findings to be more accurate (Suyatno et al., 2025). This analysis step resulted in four core themes, namely principal policies and innovations, learning processes, changes in teachers' teaching attitudes, and implementation support and obstacles.

3.4. Research Ethics

Before the data collection process began, each facilitator who became a respondent was provided with a clear and detailed explanation of the study's objectives, benefits, methods, and participation forms. The researcher ensured that all respondents understood the information and expressed their consent voluntarily, either verbally or in writing. The identity of the respondents is strictly guarded through the use of codes or pseudonyms for each informant. The data collected does not include their real names, the names of the institutions, or any other information that could lead

to the identity of the individuals or institutions for which they work. All data are stored securely and are used solely for this research. The respondents were given the freedom to access the research data at any time according to their needs. Respondents are given the freedom not to answer certain questions or withdraw from the interview process at any time without any negative consequences. This was conveyed explicitly before the interview was conducted. The selection of respondents was carried out fairly based on their roles and experiences as facilitators accompanying the principal. The researcher maintains an objective and impartial attitude during the process of data collection and analysis. The results of the interviews are only used for academic and scientific development purposes, and are not misused for political, commercial, or personal gains.

4. Results

The results of this study illustrate several important points that school principals have made to improve students' reading skills in the lower grades. Figure 1 provides a general scheme of the results of the analysis of interview transcript data that has been carried out. The following is conveyed in detail, starting from policy aspects to student reading results.

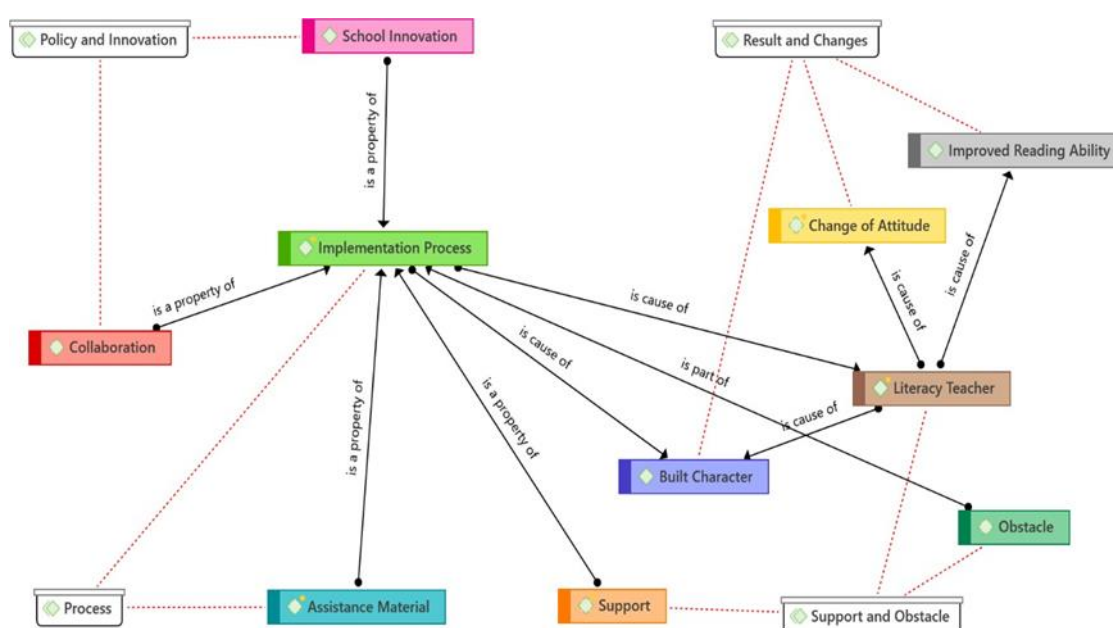


Figure 1. Results of the analysis of the interview transcript

4.1. School Principal Policies and Innovations

Based on Figure 1, it can be explained that school policies and innovations, and the process of implementing systematic learning, have an impact on improving lower-grade students' reading skills and changing teachers' attitudes toward teaching. Policies carried out by the principal include forming a school literacy team, collaborating with various relevant parties, and innovations in the appearance of classrooms and the school environment. In the implementation process, the teacher develops teaching materials through the following training and mentoring materials. The learning that is carried out is also based on character-building for students at school.

The principals' answers to policy and innovation can be grouped into two main parts: school innovation and collaboration. In terms of school innovation, the principal started by forming a school literacy team through the issuance of a Literacy Team Decree (SK) containing the names of teachers responsible for the reading ability of each group of students. Two teachers oversee beginner reading groups, letters, words, paragraphs, and stories. The decree also contains group learning time, which is carried out for 6 hours of lessons (6x45 minutes) in one week. The practice is 1 JP (45 minutes) per day and is done before learning per class begins. In addition, the principal also appealed to teachers

to make the class more lively by displaying various works of teachers in the classroom. The formation of the literacy team began with the condition that there were still many students in grades 1-4 who could not read fluently. Even 4th graders still know only letters without being able to spell and read long texts. As a result, students have difficulty studying and filling in questions because they cannot read well.

The principal's policy is to build collaboration and partnership with academics from universities in teacher training and education. This collaboration is in the form of mentoring activities and training on learning methods by lecturers to grade 1-4 teachers. Training and mentoring are carried out gradually and continuously to improve children's reading skills in the near future. Through training and mentoring, teachers are expected to have the proper learning methods to overcome the weak reading skills of lower-grade students. To support this, the headmaster allocates around 10-15% of school operational costs for improving teacher resources and school innovation.

School collaboration with parents of students is carried out through routine invitations to school, to be precise, at the beginning and end of the semester. At the start of the semester, the school informs about what activities the school will carry out in the future, both intracurricular and extracurricular. At the end-of-semester meeting, the school conveys the children's learning results, strengths and weaknesses to each student's parents. At the end of the meeting, the school gives parents some pamphlets on literacy and reading materials for their children to hang on the walls of their rooms and read while students are at home.

The school principal collaborates with the local village government to carry out workshop activities regarding student reading literacy between the village and the school. The principal invited academics as resource persons. The workshop resulted in the formation of village literacy volunteers and "Salaja Baca." "Salaja Baca" is a learning place in the village used by elementary school students in the local village outside school hours, which the village government controls. The students are guided by teachers who are called village literacy volunteers. The village literacy volunteers receive direct incentives from the village government through a Literacy Volunteer Decree from the village head.

4.2. Learning Process

On the process side, the analysis results focus on training materials and mentoring, otherwise referred to as assistance and learning materials for teachers, and the school's implementation process.

4.2.1. Assistance and Learning Materials

Collaboration and partnership between the school and academics in universities result in training and mentoring activities on learning strategies. The learning method trained is the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach. The TaRL learning approach includes four core steps: initial assessment (diagnostic), student grouping, learning, and assessment of results. In general, the TaRL learning steps used by the teacher can be described as follows. (Nathan Nachandiya, Bulama H. James, Hashim Abdullahi, 2022):

Stage 1: Diagnostic Assessment

The diagnostic or initial assessment aims to determine students' basic abilities related to reading ability using a simple instrument, as in Figure 2. This instrument measures students' abilities, starting from reading stories in long texts, sentences in paragraphs, words, and letters. Students' mistakes in reading sentences or words more than three times determine whether they move up a level, down a level, or remain at the initial level.

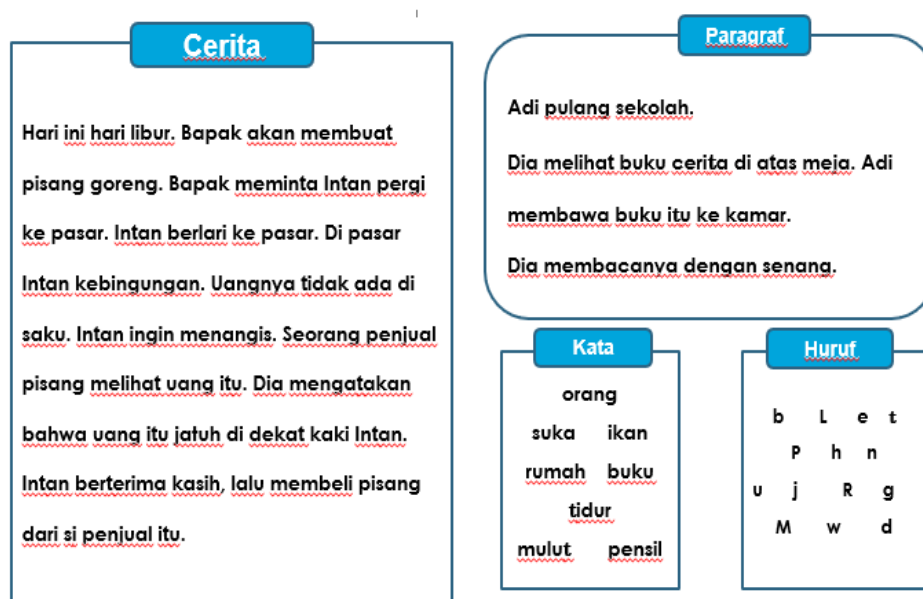


Figure 2. TaRL model student reading ability diagnostic instrument

Diagnostic assessment instruments (figure 3) first detect students' basic reading abilities. The results of this initial assessment will be the basis for grouping students based on their ability level. In detail, the initial assessment steps for students follow the following steps:

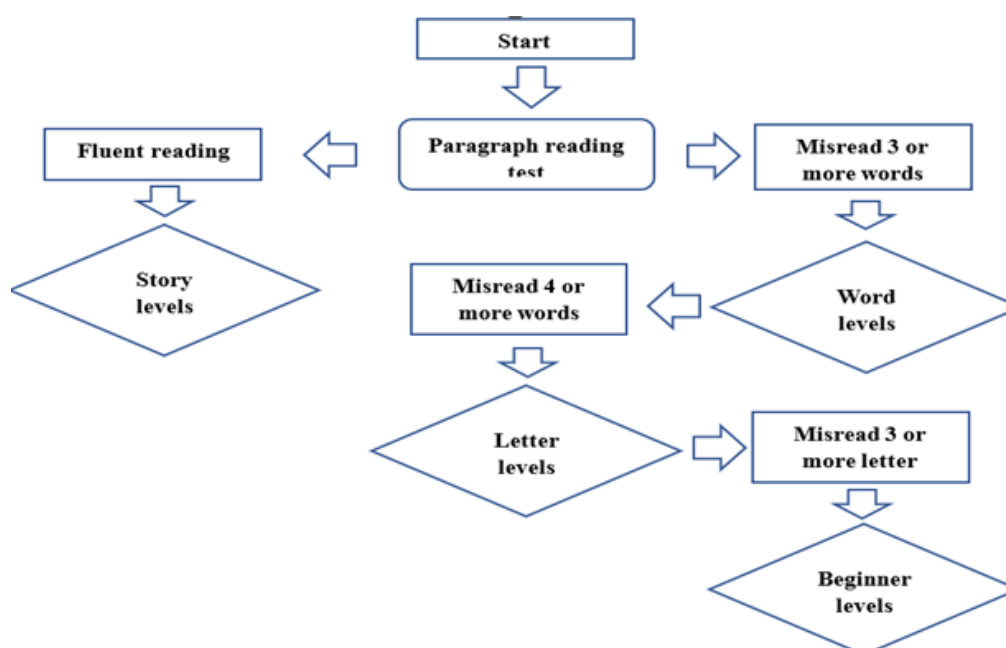


Figure 3. Flow of assessment of student's initial abilities related to reading

Students will go to the beginner level when they misread three letters or more, whereas they will go to the story level when they read one paragraph (Figure 3) without errors in all the sentences. The same goes for other levels of reading.

Diagnostic assessment was conducted for all school students in grades 1-6. Assessment is carried out by teachers who have received training and assistance. Two instruments are used during diagnostic assessments: a reading instrument, as in Figure 2, and a table for recording assessment results. The direct assessment results are entered in Table 2 by noting the date the initial assessment was carried out. This is important to know when the initial (baseline), middle (midline), and end assessments are carried out.

Table 2. Recap table of the results of the assessment of students' reading abilities

Students name	Gender	class	Reading Levels							
			Beginner	Letter	Say	Paragraph	Story			
AAA	M/F	I/II/III/IV/V/V	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment		
BBB	M/F	I/II/III/IV/V/V	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment		
etc	etc	etc	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment	Date of assessment		

Each student has reading level data, and the assessment results become the school database. The database will be discussed at meetings with teachers, parents, and the head of the school committee. A diagnostic assessment will be conducted in odd semesters at the start of each school year, especially for new students.

Stage II: Grouping

The grouping stage is carried out after the initial ability assessment (diagnostic assessment). Student grouping is based on the student's level of reading ability. The beginner and letter levels are named Group A, the word and paragraph levels are named Group B, and the story level is named Group C. Next, these groups are handled by literacy teachers who have been SK-ed. This grouping aims to provide different learning models and materials for each group. Learning material is presented as modules consisting of several learning activities.

Stage III: TaRL Learning

After conducting an initial assessment of students' reading abilities and grouping students into groups A, B, and C, the next stage is learning in class. By the principal's instructions, teachers whose names are listed in the Literacy SK are directly responsible for each group of students. This TaRL model learning activity is carried out for 6 lesson hours (6x40 minutes) per week or 1 lesson hour (40 minutes) per day. The activity was carried out from 07.15 WITA to 07.55 WITA. Each of the two teachers guides each group of students. Each group has the TaRL learning module comprising several literacy activity packages. Group A consisted of 12 packages, group B had 11 packages, and Group C had 10 literacy activity packages.

Group A learning process (beginners, letters)

Learning for group A students consists of 12 learning activity packages consisting of Recognising vowels; Get to know the consonants b,d,g,p; Consonants h,j,k; Consonants l,m,n,r,s,t,w; Elkonin; Vowels and Consonants; Rhyming words; Clap the syllables; Form words; Reading ny and ng; Read familiar words 1; and Reading familiar words 2.

Learning activities occur from Monday to Saturday and last 1 lesson hour (40 minutes) per activity package. In general, learning activities are student-centered, where students are facilitated with learning media made by the teacher, such as letter cards, syllable and word cards made by the teacher using local materials, cut pictures of familiar objects, images of animals, electronic boxes, picture paper adapted to the discussion theme as well as student worksheets and done in pairs. After

completion, other students checked the students' worksheets, and each student commented on the results of the other students' work. At the end of each learning activity, students must respond to the form by circling the emoticon symbol about the feelings of learning today on their respective worksheets. Next, students put the worksheet into the portfolio folder and get ready to return to their respective classes.

Group B learning process (words, paragraphs)

Group B learning is the same as Group A learning regarding time and place; only the person in charge is different. Learning at the word and paragraph level aims to strengthen students' understanding of grammar and punctuation, instill daily reading habits, and strengthen reading comprehension. If students can read paragraphs or short stories fluently, they will be better prepared to start reading and writing longer texts and start using texts to think about more complex concepts. Students at this level are trained in their critical thinking skills through understanding activities.

Group B learning has 11 activity packages consisting of completing gap sentences, making sentences with the help of word cards, chaining messages I can make sentences, making sentences based on pictures, creating simple paragraphs, and arranging sentences into paragraphs. I can read expressively, together, and practice mind mapping; let's make a story and read the picture. To support the implementation of this learning, the teacher prepares tools and materials such as animal picture cards, worksheets, pencils, colored pencils, whiteboards, markers, word cards, sentence cards, paper, flipchart paper, glue, series of pictures, scissors, big books, and picture paper containing stories. Furthermore, the learning activities are more student-centered, with various activities that students directly carry out. At the end of each learning activity,

Group C learning process (stories)

Group C learning (stories) also uses the same time and place: the first 40 minutes every Monday to Saturday. Students in group C are fluent readers and can read longer texts. Teachers focus on improving reading comprehension and presenting more complex texts to encourage creativity and help students plan and organise their writing.

Group C learning has ten activity packages consisting of reading aloud, finding important information in announcements, rewriting stories that have been read, finding the main points of stories in comics, describing favorite characters, predicting events in stories, creating different endings, self-reflection based on reading, writing down holiday experiences, and imagining and depicts another side in the comic story. Some of the tools and materials used during learning are stories with titles, stationery, short stories about teachers' experiences, announcements, paper, scissors, glue, post-it paper, worksheets, stories like "Mothers are great teachers," graphic charts, comics, stories about children's experiences, character drawings, drawing paper, colored pencils, and a list of guiding questions. In implementing student-centered learning, students read more stories and re-understand the contents of the stories they have read from various learning sources and learning tools and materials prepared by the teacher. The number of weekly meetings corresponds to the number of activity packages for each group.

Stage IV: Middle and Final Assessment

This TaRL learning was carried out for three months after the diagnostic assessment. At the end of the second month, a mid-evaluation is carried out to determine student progress, and at the end of the third month, a final assessment is carried out (endline). The assessment instrument uses a diagnostic assessment instrument (Figure 3), but teachers can also use other similar instruments or those they have developed themselves.

4.2.2. The Process Implementing TaRL Learning

The policy implementation process focuses on implementing the literacy decree in the form of TaRL learning practices carried out by teachers in the classroom. The analysis results show that grade 1-4 teachers have similarities in planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning. This is because they have received learning training on the Teaching at The Right Level (TaRL) approach to student reading literacy material at a training organised by the school by specifically inviting resource persons from academics who are experienced and experts in elementary education. The TaRL training was attended by five meetings for 8 hours per meeting in 1 week. Some of the materials trained are literacy, growth mindset, literacy classes, and the TaRL learning model. Teachers are provided with modules on each material being taught. Furthermore, teachers who have been trained receive assistance from tutors directly at school four times a month who focus on implementing the TaRL learning model in the classroom. At the end of each mentoring session, the principal, teacher, and facilitator hold a joint reflection to get various stories about the challenges of implementing the TaRL learning model. The reflection results become joint improvements by the teachers in improving future learning. At the end of each mentoring session, the principal, teacher, and facilitator hold a joint reflection to get various stories about the challenges of implementing the TaRL learning model. The results of reflection become joint improvements by the teachers in improving future learning.

According to the teachers' confessions, they were greatly helped and motivated to teach better after participating in the training and mentoring. The TaRL learning model feels new and is very easy to apply. Teachers' creativity and innovation in developing student reading learning tools experienced significant changes. This is shown by the various learning materials that vary by utilising readily available local materials. The teaching media include big books, ideal trees, letter cards, word cards, and picture stories.

4.3. Support and Obstacle

In implementing their policies, school principals are faced with support and obstacles to implementation. According to the principals, the most excellent support lies in the consistency of their teachers in applying the TaRL approach to learning. In addition, support from the education office in the form of policies on allocating school operational funds according to school needs has a positive influence because school principals have a policy umbrella in allocating funds, especially in developing teacher resources. Meanwhile, one of the obstacles faced is the principal's tenure, which is uncertain in time and affects the sustainability of activities due to differences in the new principal's policies. In addition, in the student aspect, the condition of parents who farm and farm more means students in the planting season rarely go to school because they have to be brought along by their parents to work or take care of their younger siblings at the farm site. As a result, the learning process in some students does not run optimally because of their minimal attendance at school.

4.4. Results and Changes

4.4.1. Student Reading Ability

Based on the diagnostic assessment results, 44% of students in class I were still at the beginner level, 32% at the letter level, 24% at the word level, and none at the paragraph and story level. This is not much different from class II, where 87.5% of students are below paragraph level, and the difference is 24% with class III, namely 63.6%. More than 50% of students in class IV still need to be below paragraph level.

Table 3. Diagnostic assessment results and grouping

Group	Levels	Number of students in class-				Total	%
		I	II	III	IV		
A	Beginner	21	-	15	12	48	21.8
	Letter	18	18	17	-	53	24.1
B	Say	16	23	12	19	70	31.8
	Paragraph	-	-	-	-	0	0
C	Story	-	13	18	18	49	22.3
Amount		65	54	62	49	220	100

Table 3 shows that 77.7% of students are still below the paragraph level alias at the level of words and letters and are beginners in the diagnostic assessment. At this stage, students are grouped based on the teacher's summary of the diagnostic assessment results. There are three groups/reading levels: Group A (beginners, letters), Group B (words, paragraphs), and Group C (stories). Each group is handled by a teacher whom the school principal has decreed.

Assessment of TaRL learning outcomes for students in grades 1 to 4 is carried out in 3 stages, namely the initial (baseline), second (midline), and third (endline) stages. The baseline activities will be carried out in December 2021, the midline in January 2022, and the third assessment (endline) in March 2022. The results of the assessment data analysis can be seen in Figure 4 and Figure 5 below:

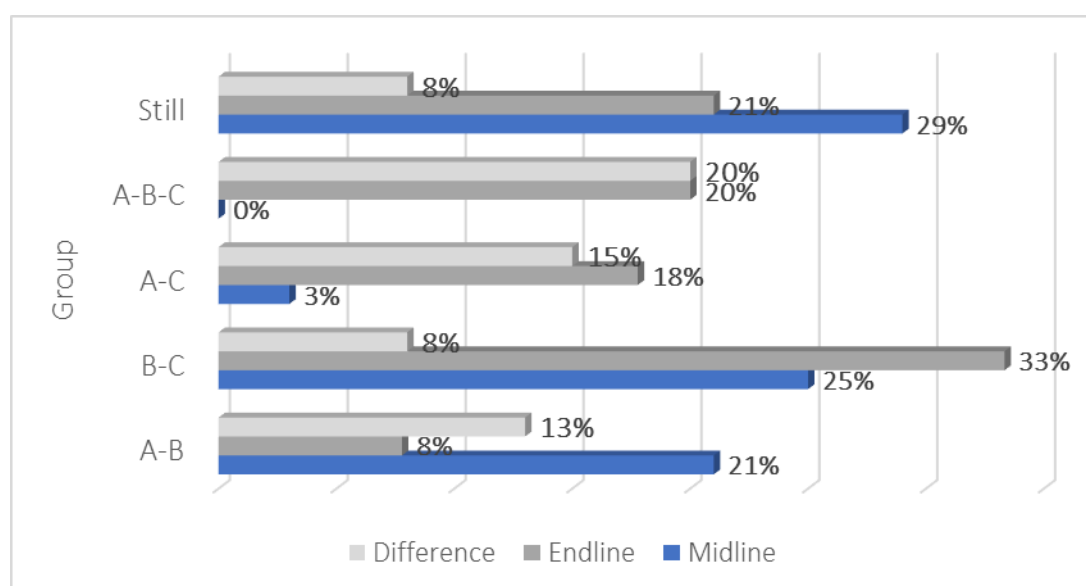
**Figure 4.** Improvement in each reading group

Figure 4 explains the changes in the number of students in each group from midline to endline. The difference in the number of students who increased from group A to B (A-B) was 8%, meaning an increase in students from beginner to letter to word levels. The same thing happened in groups B to C (B-C), namely the change in the number of students from the word and paragraph group to the story group. Furthermore, students who experienced a shift from group A to C (A-C) were only 3% or experienced an increase from the beginner group and letters to the story group. At the same time, students who experience regular changes from group A to B to C (A-B-C) are 20%.

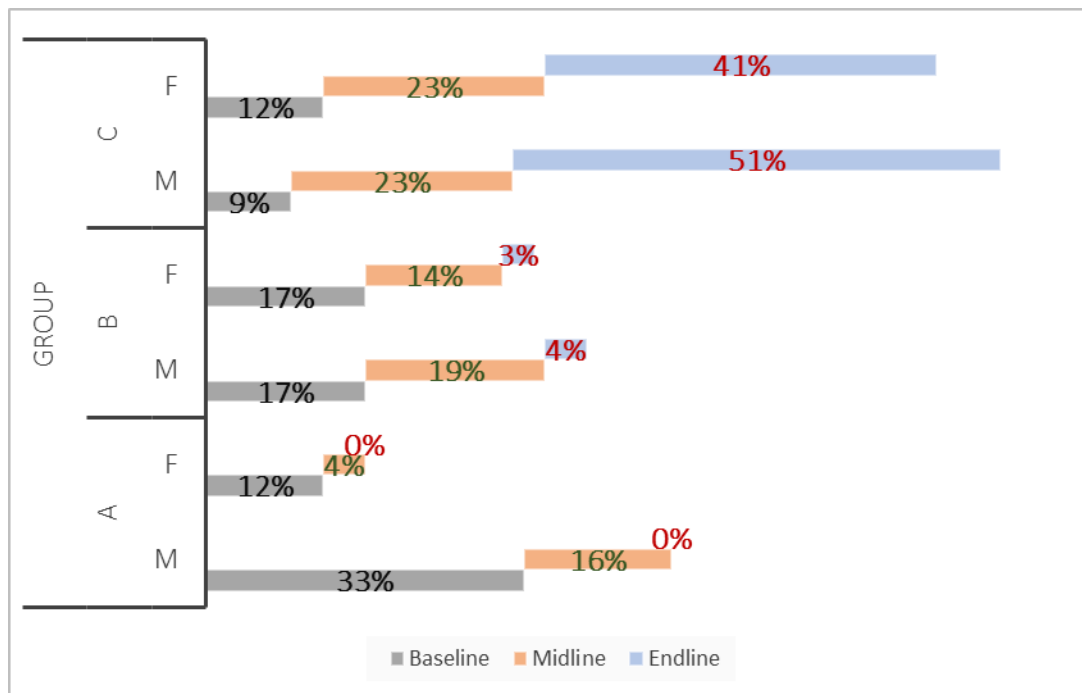


Figure 5. Improvement of students' reading skills in each group

When viewed in general, the increase in students' reading skills in each group experienced significant changes. Figure 5 shows that for the final assessment (endline), the number of students in group C (story) was 92%, consisting of 51% male students and 41% female students. The increase in the number of students in group C (story) was more than 70% from baseline to end line, while the increase was 25% from baseline to midline. This result is directly proportional to the significantly reduced number of students in group A (beginners, letters). When the baseline percentage for group A reaches 45%, after the ending, it changes to 0%, or there are no longer any male or female students at level A. In group B (words, paragraph), the percentage of students, initially 34%, changed to 33% at the midline, and only 7% remained at the endline. In total, it can be said that there was a significant increase in the number of students in the story group. As many as 92%, or around 83 students, could read fluently and understand the reading content.

4.4.2. Change in Teacher Attitude

The impact of school policies on improving student reading literacy, teacher training, and mentoring has changed the paradigm and practice of teacher learning, which has tended to be monotonous so far. With the TaRL learning approach, teachers are more enthusiastic and creative in making learning tools according to students' reading ability levels. In addition, literacy teachers feel directed and find solutions to the problems of low-grade students' low reading ability so far. The teachers are competing to fill the classroom with displays of learning media, making it a literate class. Other support from the school is in the form of special incentives, making literacy teachers compete to increase the reading ability level of the group of students they mentor.

On the student side, changes in learning attitudes through the TaRL learning approach can be seen from the level of student attendance in class, which is quite stable compared to before. The students admitted that their learning brought them happiness while studying, so their enthusiasm for attending class was quite high. Apart from that, psychologically, students are increasingly mentally awakened and more confident when studying because they study with a group of the same level.

5. Discussion

The findings of the study show that school principals are able to formulate policies that support the improvement of teachers' teaching skills and students' reading skills. This policy is realised through the formation of school literacy teams, literacy class innovations, and internal and external collaboration. This role is crucial because the principal is the main actor in changing school conditions for the better (Barber, 2020; Toprak, 2020). This is in line with the opinion of Urick & Bowers (2014) that the characteristics of the school influence the effectiveness of leadership and can influence leadership behavior (Shatzer et al., 2014). In building quality work performance for teachers, a principal must have leadership skills that can utilise teachers in such a way as to obtain high student learning outcomes as well (Hartinah et al., 2020). A school principal must build a collective commitment with teachers to contribute theoretically, methodologically, and practically in managing education in his school (Devos et al., 2014). Principals should continue to schedule programs to improve teacher professionalism and leadership (Poekert, 2016). Consequently, job satisfaction and teacher commitment in organisations are directly influenced by the principal's instructional and transformational leadership and indirectly by the school climate and teacher self-efficacy (Day et al., 2016; Dou et al., 2017). Leithwood et al. (2020) also emphasise the importance of collaboration between principals, teachers, and communities. Collaboration with academics, such as teacher training and mentoring, improves teacher teaching competence (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Steeg, 2015). If this is the case, then the welfare of the school environment (especially teachers and students) can be achieved (Handayani & Rasyid, 2015; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Tan, 2018; Wardany, 2020). The findings in this study also illustrate that school principals have shown a visionary and future-oriented attitude in fostering their citizens (Daresh & Alexander, 2015).

Other findings also show that there has been a paradigm shift in teaching teachers for the better. This can be seen from the teacher's ability to conduct diagnostic assessments and group students based on their abilities. Teachers are able to apply the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach to ensure learning is in accordance with the needs of students. This strategy is in line with the ideas of Shaughnessy & Boerst, (2018) and König et al., (2014) that teachers must be able to adapt learning to the context and real conditions in the field. Competence in conducting assessments is also the basis for developing effective learning (Christoforidou et al., 2014). Ability to manage classes, provide emotional support (Blazar & Kraft, 2017), and setting clear learning goals (Falloon, 2016) strengthen the effectiveness of differentiated learning. Teachers' knowledge of learning is no less critical and tends to build student learning achievement (Blömeke et al., 2022a). Moreover, teacher competency development must continue to be carried out so that they can manage perception, interpretation, and decision-making in learning (Blömeke et al., 2022b). Another opinion also states that teachers must be able to develop meaningful relationships with students stably and sustainably so that student learning achievement can be improved (Bardach & Klassen, 2020; Thijssen et al., 2022). A teacher must have competencies appropriate to the subject being taught, manage student learning, and understand student diversity through the initial diagnosis of their strengths and weaknesses (González-López, 2021; Ramdani et al., 2019).

Teachers also apply teaching materials based on local wisdom and use the mother tongue as a learning medium. This is in line with the opinion Guzmán (2021) that learning using the mother tongue is effective in improving students' reading skills. In addition to the cognitive aspect, the affective aspects of students, such as confidence and a pleasant learning atmosphere, need to be cultivated (McGeown et al., 2015). This aligns with the practice of decorating classrooms with literacy elements that are engaging and make students feel comfortable, as found in this study. The contextual approach is also supported by Fullan (2014) and Kulophas & Hallinger (2021) that emphasises the need for learning that is relevant to the student's background. In addition, teachers must place students as partners in learning (Healey et al., 2016).

Students' reading ability is influenced by several supporting factors, including access to reading materials and the quality of teachers' teaching (Thiel, M., & Effenberger, 2019). This study shows that the existence of literacy classes and teacher training is an important aspect that supports the improvement of students' reading skills. It is important for teachers to understand the context, teaching strategies, and what makes them successful in learning (Kim et al., 2019). To achieve this, teachers need to be trained and guided so that their understanding and skills continue to improve (Tican & Deniz, 2019). In addition, research by Gao et al. (2022) emphasises the importance of providing access, such as classroom libraries, as well as clear instructions from teachers. Teachers can use social media and online platforms to access student reading materials, such as videos (Momani, 2020; Ok & Howorth, 2022). Therefore, literacy improvement strategies must include strengthening teacher capacity and expanding students' reading access in the learning environment.

Some research shows that the pressure on standardised grades in learning can inhibit students' interest in reading. Nicholas et al., (2021) highlighting the tendency of schools to focus only on final grades and exams, rather than on the meaningful learning process. As a result, students feel depressed and lose motivation to read voluntarily. It also shows that irrelevant and doctrinal learning can discourage students from developing their literacy potential (Budiharto et al., 2018). The decline in students' literacy ability can be caused by the lack of reading skills that students have. This indicates that literacy skills, including text comprehension and writing, depend highly on basic reading skills. Reading ability greatly influences the reading ability of students in both upper and lower grades (Guo et al., 2015). If students' reading skills are not improved since preschool, reading significantly later in life will be difficult, and they risk developing dyslexia in their families (Snowling et al., 2016).

The findings also confirm that more than 90% of students' improved reading ability indicates that school policies and learning strategies have been effective. This confirms the important role of professional teachers (Meroni et al., 2015) and visionary school leadership (Eradze et al., 2019; Louis et al., 2016). However, there is a small percentage of students who have not shown significant improvement, which is likely influenced by external factors such as economic conditions, family background, or socio-cultural factors (Vinopal & Morrissey, 2020). Therefore, policy interventions must be holistic, taking into account the internal and external factors of students.

6. Conclusion

This research shows that the leadership of school principals has a central role in improving the quality of student learning and literacy. The principal succeeded in formulating strategic policies through the formation of literacy teams, classroom innovation, and collaboration with various parties. This policy is able to create a learning ecosystem that supports the development of teachers' teaching skills and students' reading skills. In addition, there has been a change in the paradigm of teacher teaching, where teachers have begun to implement differentiated learning, such as the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach. Teachers can conduct diagnostic assessments, group students based on ability, and use local context-based and mother tongue-based media and teaching materials. This approach is effective in increasing students' interest and reading ability. More than 90% of students experienced an improvement in reading skills, indicating that school policies and learning practices are running effectively. However, a small percentage of students have not shown significant development, likely due to external factors such as economic conditions, social environment, and family background. Overall, the results of this study emphasise that the synergy between the principal's leadership, teacher competence, relevant learning approaches, and learning environment support is the key to success in improving student literacy in elementary schools.

7. Limitations and Suggestions

There are several limitations observed in this study, such as the lack of cultural diversity and the type of school explored, so that these findings may be less representative of being applied in elementary schools in other countries. In addition, the exploration of the principal's leadership has not touched all aspects of the leadership that the principal has because the focus of the discussion is limited to how the policies are produced, as well as their implications for the paradigm and teaching practices of teachers that improve students' reading skills. Therefore, as a suggestion in this study covers several important aspects, namely strengthening the leadership of principals and teachers through training and mentoring, future research can explore all the leadership duties of a school principal that apply internationally, as well as the need for socialisation to strengthen support from various parties ranging from the education office to the community in improving student learning achievement together. The socialisation in question can be carried out through seminars or the dissemination of findings in research with stakeholders in the education sector.

Declarations

Author Contributions. A.H.: conceptualisation, methodology, validation. A.G.: methodology, review-editing, validation. KH: review-editing, investigation, final original manuscript preparation. C.N.L.: data collection, data analysis. S.S: visualisation, data analysis. LHA: project administration, supervision. All authors have read and approved the published on the final version of the article.

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About the Contributor(s)

Arif Hidayad, Yogyakarta State University, Indonesia

Email: arifhidayad.2022@student.uny.ac.id

Anik Ghufon, Yogyakarta State University, Indonesia

Email: anikghufon@uny.ac.id

Kana Hidayati , Yogyakarta State University, Indonesia

Email: kana@uny.ac.id

Christiana Niken Larasati , Yogyakarta State University, Indonesia

Email: christiananiken.2022@student.uny.ac.id

Suratman, STKIP Taman Siswa Bima, Indonesia

Email: suratmanratnah@gmail.com

L.Hasan Ashari, Nusantara Global Education Institute, Indonesia

Email: laluhasanashari@gmail.com

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