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# AN ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' CONTINGENCY LEADERSHIP IN ACCELERATING SCHOOL QUALITY

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**Abstract.** Accelerating the quality of primary education in the Merdeka Belajar era demands an adaptive reorientation of school management. However, principals' tendency to implement a uniform leadership model often overlooks teachers' diverse characteristics. This study aims to analyze the implementation of the principal's contingency leadership in improving school quality, describe adjustments to leadership style based on teacher readiness, and identify the factors that support and inhibit it. Using a qualitative approach with a hermeneutic phenomenological design, data were gathered through interviews, observations, and documentation in three public elementary schools in Cluwak, Pati. The findings reveal a dualism of reality between adaptive-situational patterns and formalistic standardization. Effective leadership style adjustments (shifting from selling to participating and delegating) successfully transform school quality into a substantive level, fostering instructional innovation and improving Education Report Cards. Conversely, rigid governance only fosters a compliance culture that reduces quality to mere paperwork. In conclusion, the acceleration of school quality is determined in large part by leadership style flexibility. Principals are suggested to develop periodic teacher readiness portfolios to provide proportional supervision and autonomy.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental catalyst for developing high-quality human capital. Currently, primary education in Indonesia faces complex global challenges that necessitate a comprehensive, structured, and sustainable acceleration of educational quality (As'a et al., 2023). Through this process, students acquire the essential knowledge, skills, attitudes, and character traits needed to navigate life's diverse challenges. Consequently, elevating the standard of education has become a top priority in national development. Educational quality relies not merely on the availability of facilities and infrastructure but is heavily influenced by how effectively principals manage and lead these institutions (Roesminingsih et al., 2025). School quality is also closely associated with the principal's capacity to develop a school culture oriented toward continuous improvement, collaboration, and the achievement of educational goals (Sumiran et al., 2022). This drive for improvement has grown even more urgent alongside the national shift toward the Emancipated Learning paradigm. The implementation of the Independent Curriculum demands greater flexibility, managerial autonomy, and a genuinely student-centered approach to learning (Arifianto et al., 2026). Because educational quality is the bedrock for producing outstanding individuals, schools must constantly build their institutional capacity to deliver services that meet the expectations of all stakeholders (Ningsih, 2024). Fundamentally, quality enhancement at the primary level spans a broad spectrum, encompassing both academic and non-academic dimensions (Sulistiyarini et al., 2024). Within the context of this educational transformation, the Education Report Card emerges as a data-driven evaluation tool. It provides an objective snapshot of literacy, numeracy, character development, and the overall climate of safety and inclusivity within the school environment (Erfiyana et al., 2024). However, the crucial indicators highlighted in this report card will not show meaningful progress without systemic improvements at the school level. This absolute necessity requires a shift in school management to make it more adaptive and responsive to modern demands (Safitri, 2021).

Primary schools play a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for a student's knowledge, skills, and character. At this stage, children encounter foundational learning experiences that heavily dictate their success at subsequent educational levels. Therefore, the caliber of primary schools is a determining factor in the overall quality of the education system. To achieve comprehensive quality improvement, the focus cannot be limited solely to academic metrics and physical infrastructure; it must also actively address students' psychological well-being (Zamroni et al., 2022). Beyond psychological aspects, actual acceleration in quality depends largely on a school's capacity to innovate within the classroom. For instance, incorporating inquiry-based training models has been shown to optimize young learners' understanding of scientific thinking (Ratnasari, 2020). Implementing these innovations requires sound management encompassing strategic planning, execution, monitoring, and ongoing evaluation. In this scenario, the school principal is responsible for directing, coordinating, and maximizing all available resources to meet educational targets efficiently and effectively (Am, 2022).

A principal's leadership extends far beyond mere administrative duties. It acts as a critical instrument for guiding, motivating, and developing teachers, enabling them to deliver optimal educational services through continuous academic supervision (Alhabsyi et al., 2022). In this regard, Sundari et al. (2023) demonstrated that principals can improve teacher discipline through strategic leadership practices involving direction, supervision, guidance, and reinforcement of professional responsibilities. This finding highlights that principal leadership is closely connected to teachers' professional behavior and the effective implementation of school programs. As the central educational leader, the principal exerts a profound influence on a school's success. Beyond administration, principals serve as instructional leaders tasked with elevating the quality of both the learning process and its outcomes. Effective leadership boosts teacher morale, fosters a collaborative culture, encourages classroom innovation, and ultimately elevates the school's organizational performance (Badrudin et al., 2020). Empirical evidence further demonstrates that principal leadership and teacher performance are positively associated with school quality, indicating that quality improvement depends on the interaction between effective leadership and teacher performance (Susanto & Pujiyati, 2024). Similarly, Setiyanti et al. (2025) found that principal transformational leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism are important factors associated with learning quality. These findings indicate that leadership contributes to educational quality not only through direct managerial practices but also through the development of a supportive school culture and the strengthening of teacher professionalism. Conversely, inadequate leadership can severely hinder institutional goals and degrade the quality of education provided.

Various studies highlight that achieving effective school leadership remains a challenge. Suryadhiningrat et al. (2022) found that poor teacher performance is often linked to suboptimal academic supervision and professional coaching by school heads. Meanwhile, Malik et al. (2021) observed that principal leadership practices frequently fail to inspire optimal teacher participation and innovation, even when adequate school resources are available. The findings of Sundari et al. (2023) further indicate that effective principal strategies are important in shaping teacher discipline and professional behavior, suggesting that leadership practices influence not only teacher performance but also the behavioral conditions necessary for implementing school improvement programs. Existing literature often assumes that a particular leadership model can be applied broadly across educational institutions, even though schools differ in organizational conditions, teacher characteristics, and institutional demands (Izzah et al., 2023). Similarly, the relationship between leadership and school quality is inseparable from the organizational culture and teachers' professional capacity. Sumiran et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of school culture in supporting quality improvement, while Susanto & Pujiyati (2024) demonstrate the contribution of principal leadership and teacher performance to school quality. These findings suggest that successful leadership is not dictated solely by a principal's formal competencies, but rather by their agility in adapting their leadership style to fit the distinct circumstances and needs of their school.

This phenomenon is clearly observable in several public primary schools in Cluwak

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District, Pati Regency. Preliminary studies indicate that despite principals possessing adequate academic qualifications and operating with relatively good infrastructure, school quality has yet to show optimal growth. While some teachers execute their duties independently and bring innovation to their classrooms, others still require intensive direction, guidance, and mentoring. This situation suggests that the current leadership approaches do not fully account for the varying readiness levels and individual needs of the teaching staff. Consequently, successful governance relies heavily on a robust synergy between the principal's managerial acumen and teachers' competencies, which together generate job performance that directly translates into improved school quality (Rahmad, 2021). This condition is particularly important because teachers do not possess identical levels of competence, experience, motivation, independence, or willingness to undertake new responsibilities. Therefore, applying the same leadership treatment to all teachers may create a mismatch between leadership behavior and the specific needs of individual teachers.

One highly relevant framework for addressing this issue is contingency leadership theory. This theory posits that there is no single "best" leadership style applicable to every situation. Instead, leadership effectiveness hinges on a leader's ability to adjust their behavior according to their subordinates' characteristics, the organizational environment, and the specific demands of the task at hand (Arfandi & Ihwan, 2020). In the primary school context, principals must be adept at identifying teacher readiness levels so they can deploy the appropriate leadership approach to drive quality improvement. Several researchers have explored contingency leadership in education. Sabthazi et al. (2024) found that aligning leadership styles with employee traits and work conditions boosts organizational effectiveness. This is corroborated by Arifianto et al. (2026), who demonstrated that a principal's flexibility in adapting to the maturity and motivational dynamics of primary school teachers significantly escalates tangible teacher performance. Nevertheless, research explicitly examining the implementation of principal contingency leadership to improve primary school quality remains quite limited, especially in rural educational contexts. Most prior studies have focused primarily on the general impact of leadership on teacher performance or overall school effectiveness.

Recognizing these circumstances, a definitive research gap exists regarding the practical application of principal contingency leadership in advancing primary school quality. The novelty of this study lies in its in-depth analysis of how a principal's leadership style aligns with various situational conditions linked to quality enhancement. This encompasses academic supervision, teacher competency development, instructional innovation, resource management, and the reinforcement of a culture of quality. Therefore, this research aims to analyze the implementation of principal contingency leadership in elevating school quality. It seeks to describe how leadership styles are adapted based on teacher conditions and to identify the factors that support and hinder this implementation across public primary schools in Cluwak District, Pati Regency.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological design. A qualitative framework was deliberately chosen because the core objective of this research is to deeply explore and understand social reality through the lived experiences of the subjects within their natural environment (Safarudin et al., 2023). Furthermore, this approach provides the depth needed to truly grasp the principal's experience in applying contingency leadership to elevate school quality. The hermeneutic phenomenological design specifically allows us to uncover and interpret the underlying meaning behind how principals adapt their leadership styles in response to varying school conditions and needs (van Manen, 2023). The research was conducted at public primary schools in Cluwak District, Pati Regency, Central Java, from January to May 2026. We selected the research sites purposively, ensuring that the schools' specific characteristics aligned well with our research focus. Informants were also chosen through purposive sampling. The primary inclusion criterion was the individual's ability to clearly articulate their conscious experiences regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Nasir et al., 2023). Consequently, the principal served as the primary informant, while teachers, educational staff, and school committee members acted as supporting informants. The study utilized both

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primary and secondary data. We gathered primary data directly in the field through in-depth interviews and close observation of the principal's leadership activities. Secondary data were extracted through document analysis, which included reviewing the School Work Plan (RKS), the School Budget and Activity Plan (RKAS), academic supervision records, program evaluation reports, accreditation results, meeting minutes, and other relevant documents related to quality management.

In keeping with qualitative research traditions, the researcher served as the primary data-collection tool, or the "human instrument." This is critical because only a human possesses the necessary adaptive capacity to interpret deeper meanings, pick up on subtle emotional nuances, and untangle complex managerial interactions as they happen in the field (Syahrizal & Jailani, 2023). As the primary instrument, the researcher employed three complementary data collection techniques: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observation was used to directly monitor the principal's behavior when applying situational leadership during daily school routines. We utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews to foster critical dialogue, which helped elicit the stories, rationales, and personal interpretations behind the principal's specific contingency decisions (Oerther, 2021). Meanwhile, the documentation study served to cross-reference and verify the data we gathered from the interviews and observations (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

For data analysis, we applied the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2020). During the condensation phase, raw data were rigorously selected, simplified, and categorized to fit the research focus. We then displayed this condensed data as a thematic narrative, making the interpretation process much more manageable. Conclusions were drawn iteratively throughout the research process until the findings proved both credible and consistent. To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the data, we implemented source triangulation, methodological (technique) triangulation, and member checking. Applying triangulation is crucial in qualitative analysis; it builds credibility, mitigates the researcher's subjective biases, and yields a more comprehensive understanding of the leadership dynamics under study (Nurfajriani et al., 2024). Source triangulation involved comparing the perspectives and information provided by the principal, teachers, administrative staff, and the school committee. Technique triangulation was achieved by cross-checking the interview transcripts against observational notes and official documents. Finally, member checking was conducted to verify that our academic interpretations accurately reflected the informants' lived experiences, thereby ensuring high data credibility.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Teacher Readiness: Between Dynamic Mapping and Formalist Standardization

Teacher readiness constitutes a fundamental element of Situational Leadership Theory, encompassing both teachers' technical competence (ability) and psychological commitment (willingness) to perform specific professional responsibilities. Effective leadership requires principals to continuously assess these two dimensions so that supervisory strategies and leadership behaviors align with the developmental needs of individual teachers. As presented in Table 1, the findings reveal substantial differences in how the three principals conceptualized and assessed teacher readiness. The data matrix synthesizes evidence from principal interviews, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and documentary analysis, thereby providing triangulated evidence of readiness-mapping practices across the three schools.

As shown in Table 1, the three schools demonstrated contrasting approaches to assessing teacher readiness despite operating within the same educational system. While all principals acknowledged the importance of teacher competence, their interpretations of readiness differed considerably. SDN B adopted a dynamic and individualized approach that integrated teachers' professional competence with their motivation and confidence. In contrast, SDN A and SDN C emphasized administrative equality through standardized treatment, assuming that teachers possessed relatively similar levels of readiness regardless of differences in experience,

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competence, or professional needs.

**Table 1.** Teacher Readiness Data Matrix

| Data Source | SDN A (Rigid-Bureaucratic Characteristics) | SDN B (Open-Adaptive Characteristics) | SDN C (Formal-Seniority Characteristics) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Principal Interviews** | Prioritizes equality of qualifications; instructions are delivered uniformly in formal forums without differentiation. | Periodically maps teachers' abilities and willingness through actual performance observation and personalized approaches. | Assesses teacher skill and will based on a sense of fairness; believes all teachers share the identical standard foundation. |
| **Teacher Interviews** | Senior teachers feel burdened by new technical demands; younger teachers feel a lack of operational classroom guidance. | Feel their individual capacity and competence are proportionately valued in alignment with their task loads. | Feel they are treated equally in administrative terms, yet their practical classroom guidance needs are neglected. |
| **Observations** | Early-year plenary meetings set rigid collective targets without any dedicated sessions for competency mapping. | The principal maintains a portfolio of teacher performance records; task distribution is grounded in historical track records. | The distribution of teaching loads and additional duties relies heavily on formal seniority and the official staffing structure. |
| **Documentation** | Administrative Task Assignment Decrees are uniform; no documentation exists analyzing teacher competency prerequisites. | Features periodic academic supervision records and self-assessment competency mapping instruments. | Task distribution documents are based purely on degree linearity regulations and civil service ranks. |

Viewed through a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, these findings reveal fundamentally different meanings attached to teacher readiness. At SDN B, the principal interpreted readiness as a dynamic and evolving condition rather than a fixed administrative category. Teacher competence and willingness were assessed through continuous classroom observations, reflective dialogue, and evaluation of previous performance. Such situational interpretation enabled the principal to determine the most appropriate level of guidance and professional support for each teacher. Consequently, teachers reported feeling that their individual capacities were recognized and appreciated, which strengthened their intrinsic motivation and professional confidence.

By contrast, principals at SDN A and SDN C tended to interpret readiness through the lens of administrative uniformity. Leadership decisions were largely based on assumptions of equality and fairness, resulting in standardized instructions delivered through formal meetings without systematic differentiation according to teachers' developmental needs. Interview data indicate that this uniform approach produced contrasting negative experiences among teachers. Senior teachers expressed difficulties adapting to new technical demands without adequate consultation, whereas novice teachers reported insufficient operational guidance for classroom practice. Thus, the principle of equality was translated into standardized treatment rather than equitable professional support.

Documentary evidence further reinforces these contrasting leadership practices. As summarized in Table 1, SDN B maintained supervision records, teacher performance portfolios, and competency-mapping instruments that informed task allocation and coaching decisions. Conversely, documentation from SDN A and SDN C primarily consisted of administrative assignment decrees and formal staffing records without systematic analyses of teacher competence or professional readiness. These findings suggest that readiness assessment at the latter schools remained largely procedural rather than developmental. The observed differences align closely with Situational Leadership Theory, proposed by Hersey & Blanchard (1988), which

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defines readiness as "Readiness is the extent to which a follower has the ability and willingness to accomplish a specific task."

This definition emphasizes that readiness is determined not only by technical competence (ability) but also by psychological commitment (willingness). Consequently, leadership effectiveness depends on the principal's ability to accurately diagnose both dimensions before selecting an appropriate leadership style. Failure to differentiate leadership behaviors according to teachers' readiness levels may result in ineffective supervision, reduced professional autonomy, and diminished organizational learning.

Overall, the evidence presented in Table 1 demonstrates that teacher readiness cannot be understood as a static administrative status. Rather, it represents a dynamic interaction between competence, motivation, and contextual demands that requires continuous interpretation by school leaders. Schools that actively map these dimensions are more likely to provide differentiated professional support and foster teacher development, whereas reliance on formalistic standardization risks reducing teachers to administrative categories, limiting instructional innovation, and weakening overall school improvement efforts.

**2. The Dominance of Task Behavior: Between Bureaucratic Accountability and the Shackling of Creativity**

Task behavior reflects the extent to which a leader defines staff roles, provides specific direction, establishes operational procedures, and monitors task implementation. Within the framework of situational leadership, task behavior refers to the extent to which leaders structure work by specifying what should be done, how it should be carried out, when it must be completed, and who is responsible for its execution. As presented in Table 2, the three principals exhibited consistently high levels of task behavior; however, the practical expression of this leadership dimension differed substantially across schools. The matrix integrates evidence from interviews, observations, and documentary analysis, thereby providing triangulated evidence of how directive leadership was enacted in each research setting.

**Table 2.** Task Behavior Data Matrix

| Data Source | SDN A (Rigid-Bureaucratic Characteristics) | SDN B (Open-Adaptive Characteristics) | SDN C (Formal-Seniority Characteristics) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Principal Interviews** | Focuses intensely on meeting curriculum targets and precise school administrative reporting in accordance with regulations. | Provides detailed instructions for new tasks and consistently accompanies them with logical explanations of their importance. | Emphasizes strict, unwavering compliance with official SOPs to maintain stability in organizational performance. |
| **Teacher Interviews** | Complain that supervision focuses entirely on document completeness rather than tangible teaching obstacles. | Feel highly comfortable because the principal's detailed instructions are balanced by open spaces for discussion. | State that communication from the principal tends to be strictly one-way and consists of absolute instructions. |
| **Observations** | The principal strictly inspects teachers' logbooks and instructional devices at the end of every week. | The principal provides specific technical guidance (teaching style) only to teachers newly appointed to manage specific programs. | Coordination meetings are dominated by the principal, who delivers official technical guidelines without any Q&A sessions. |
| **Documentation** | Control books for instructional device inspections; attendance logs and written administrative reprimands. | Internal technical guidelines (local SOPs) supplemented with dialogic feedback notes between the principal and teachers. | Official memos detailing principal instructions regarding strict deadlines for submitting classroom administrative documents. |

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As shown in Table 2, all three principals demonstrated a relatively high degree of task behavior, yet the manner in which directive leadership was implemented produced markedly different organizational dynamics. Although each principal emphasized instructional guidance and administrative accountability, the balance between control and professional support varied considerably. These variations suggest that similar levels of task-oriented leadership may generate contrasting outcomes depending on how directives are communicated and contextualized.

At SDN B, task behavior was expressed through detailed guidance accompanied by persuasive communication, reflecting the characteristics of the selling leadership style. The principal provided explicit instructions primarily when teachers encountered unfamiliar responsibilities or when policy changes required careful implementation. Rather than functioning solely as a supervisory mechanism, these directives served as opportunities for professional learning and capacity development. Teachers perceived this leadership approach positively because clear expectations were consistently accompanied by opportunities for dialogue, clarification, and collaborative problem-solving. Consequently, instructional guidance was interpreted as professional support rather than bureaucratic control.

In contrast, SDN A and SDN C demonstrated a predominantly telling leadership style characterized by highly directive communication and limited opportunities for reciprocal interaction. Interviews, observations, and documentary evidence revealed that administrative compliance constituted the primary focus of supervision. Routine inspections of lesson plans, teaching portfolios, attendance records, and other administrative documents were conducted systematically, while coordination meetings largely functioned as venues for disseminating official instructions rather than facilitating professional discussion. As a result, teachers tended to perceive supervision as an administrative obligation instead of a developmental process designed to improve instructional quality. These findings correspond closely with the conceptualization of task behavior proposed by Hersey & Blanchard (1988), who define task behavior as: "Task behavior is the extent to which leaders engage in spelling out the duties and responsibilities of an individual or group. These behaviors include telling people what to do, how to do it, when to do it, where to do it, and who is to do it."

From a contingency leadership perspective, a high level of task behavior is not inherently problematic. Directive leadership is particularly effective when followers possess limited competence or are performing unfamiliar tasks that require structured guidance. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of task behavior depends largely on its alignment with teachers' readiness levels. At SDN B, directive behaviors were implemented flexibly and adjusted according to teachers' developmental needs, thereby strengthening professional confidence and organizational trust. Conversely, at SDN A and SDN C, directive practices were applied more uniformly regardless of differences in teacher competence and experience. Such a standardized implementation transformed instructional supervision into a bureaucratic mechanism that emphasized procedural compliance over professional growth.

Consequently, excessive reliance on rigid task behavior may unintentionally constrain teachers' autonomy and creativity. Teachers become increasingly oriented toward fulfilling administrative requirements instead of experimenting with innovative instructional practices. In this context, bureaucratic accountability gradually replaces pedagogical reflection as the dominant organizational priority. These findings reinforce the central proposition of contingency leadership theory that leadership effectiveness depends not on the intensity of directive behavior alone, but on the leader's capacity to adapt that behavior to followers' readiness and the situational demands of the organization. Thus, the evidence presented in Table 2 demonstrates that similar levels of task behavior can generate substantially different educational outcomes depending on the extent to which directive leadership is balanced with communication, trust, and professional support.

### 3. Relationship Behavior: Delegative Autonomy versus Pseudo-Compliance

Relationship behavior refers to the extent to which leaders foster socio-emotional support through two-way communication, active listening, participation, and collaborative decision-making. Within Situational Leadership Theory, this leadership dimension reflects how principals

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build interpersonal relationships that encourage teacher engagement, professional confidence, and organizational commitment. As presented in Table 3, the findings reveal substantial differences in the implementation of relationship behavior across the three schools. The matrix integrates evidence from principal interviews, teacher interviews, observations, and documentary analysis to illustrate how communication patterns and delegation practices shaped teachers' professional experiences.

**Table 3.** Relationship Behavior Data Matrix

| Data Source | SDN A (Rigid-Bureaucratic Characteristics) | SDN B (Open-Adaptive Characteristics) | SDN C (Formal-Seniority Characteristics) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Principal Interviews** | Involves teachers on committees, but strategic decisions are made unilaterally by leadership. | Grants broad autonomy and full trust to teachers who are deemed independent enough to manage programs. | Involves teachers in meetings but serves more as a formality to socialize predetermined decisions. |
| **Teacher Interviews** | Admit they are rarely invited to substantial discussions; their role is limited to executing work instructions. | Feel trusted because there is no micromanagement over minor technicalities; they feel free to explore classroom methods. | Feel that aspirations shared in meetings are merely recorded and never integrated into actual school policies. |
| **Observations** | Formal interactions center entirely around the principal's office; informal chats regarding classroom innovations are rare. | The principal frequently engages in relaxed discussions in the staff room, listens to grievances, and provides moral support. | The meeting atmosphere feels rigid; teachers tend to remain silent and merely nod to signify agreement with presentations. |
| **Documentation** | Meeting minutes containing only attendance lists and unilateral summaries of the principal's decisions. | Independent Task Letters; documents showing full delegation of authority in developing the school-level curriculum. | The committee's organizational structure documents that position teachers strictly as operational, technical executors. |

As shown in Table 3, the three principals demonstrated markedly different approaches to relationship behavior despite operating within comparable organizational contexts. While all principals formally involved teachers in school activities, the quality of participation, communication, and delegation differed considerably. SDN B emphasized collaborative communication and meaningful delegation, whereas SDN A and SDN C exhibited more hierarchical communication patterns that limited teachers' participation in strategic decision-making.

At SDN B, the principal effectively implemented the participating and delegating leadership styles by cultivating trusting professional relationships beyond formal administrative interactions. Observational data revealed frequent informal discussions in the teachers' room, during which the principal actively listened to teachers' concerns, facilitated reflective dialogue, and provided both emotional and professional support. Strategic responsibilities were delegated based on teachers' demonstrated competence and prior performance, granting experienced teachers substantial autonomy to manage school programs and develop instructional innovations. Consequently, teachers reported feeling trusted, respected, and motivated to experiment with creative pedagogical practices without fear of excessive administrative intervention.

In contrast, SDN A and SDN C displayed considerably lower levels of authentic relationship behavior. Although teachers were formally invited to attend meetings and serve on committees, documentary evidence and interview data indicate that strategic decisions had largely been determined before consultation. As summarized in Table 3, meeting minutes primarily documented leadership decisions rather than collaborative deliberations, while committee structures positioned teachers mainly as implementers of predetermined policies. Classroom observations further revealed that communication remained predominantly one-way, with

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teachers rarely expressing alternative viewpoints or engaging in critical discussion. Such interaction patterns suggest that participation functioned more as procedural compliance than as genuine shared decision-making.

These leadership practices contributed to the emergence of what may be described as pseudo-compliance, in which teachers outwardly demonstrated agreement with organizational decisions while limiting their professional initiative. Rather than reflecting organizational commitment, this compliance appeared to stem from concerns about administrative accountability and fear of making procedural mistakes. Consequently, teachers tended to adopt risk-averse behaviors, adhering strictly to existing routines rather than exploring innovative instructional approaches. These findings are consistent with Hersey & Blanchard's (1988) conceptualization of relationship behavior, which they define as: "Relationship behavior is the extent to which leaders engage in two-way or multiway communication. The behaviors include listening, facilitating, and supportive behaviors."

From the perspective of contingency leadership theory, relationship behavior becomes increasingly important as teachers develop greater competence and confidence. Under such conditions, leadership effectiveness depends less on direct supervision and more on creating opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and shared responsibility. The evidence from SDN B demonstrates that supportive communication and meaningful delegation strengthen teachers' professional autonomy and encourage instructional innovation. Conversely, the experiences of SDN A and SDN C indicate that limited relationship behavior and centralized decision-making may weaken teachers' sense of ownership, discourage initiative, and reduce opportunities for collaborative organizational learning.

Overall, the evidence presented in Table 3 demonstrates that relationship behavior extends beyond maintaining harmonious interpersonal interactions. Rather, it serves as a strategic leadership mechanism to build professional trust, facilitate organizational learning, and empower teachers to contribute actively to school improvement. Schools that cultivate genuine dialogue and meaningful delegation create conditions that support continuous innovation, whereas schools characterized by symbolic participation and centralized control risk fostering a culture of passive compliance that constrains teachers' professional agency and long-term school development.

**4. Style Flexibility in Responding to Staff Character Diversity**

Style flexibility represents a principal's capacity to diagnose situational conditions and adjust leadership behavior in response to differences in teachers' competence, experience, motivation, and task demands. Within the contingency perspective, leadership effectiveness does not depend on the consistent application of a single leadership style, but rather on the leader's ability to modify directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating behaviors in response to changing circumstances. As shown in Table 4, the findings indicate substantial differences in the degree of style flexibility demonstrated by the principals across the three schools. The data matrix integrates evidence from principal interviews, teacher interviews, observations, and documentation to illustrate how each principal adjusted or maintained leadership practices in response to diverse teacher characteristics and situational demands.

As shown in Table 4, SDN B demonstrates the greatest leadership flexibility, whereas SDN A and SDN C tend to maintain relatively uniform leadership approaches. The differences are evident not only in the principals' stated leadership orientations but also in their daily supervisory practices, communication patterns, and supporting documentation. These findings suggest that style flexibility is closely associated with the principal's ability to recognize differences among teachers and translate those differences into differentiated leadership responses.

At SDN B, style flexibility was demonstrated through differentiated leadership practices based on teachers' professional characteristics and current needs. The principal adopted a collaborative approach when working with experienced teachers who demonstrated sufficient competence and independence, while providing more intensive technical mentoring to novice teachers who required additional guidance. Observation data further indicated that the principal adjusted the intensity of supervision according to the nature of the situation. Routine academic

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matters were managed with greater autonomy, whereas urgent or complex situations received more direct intervention. The principal's coaching journal, as summarized in Table 4, further confirms that different approaches were documented for different teachers. This pattern indicates that leadership adaptation was not incidental but constituted a deliberate component of the principal's supervisory practice.

**Table 4.** Style Flexibility Data Matrix

| Data Source | SDN A (Rigid-Bureaucratic Characteristics) | SDN B (Open-Adaptive Characteristics) | SDN C (Formal-Seniority Characteristics) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Principal Interviews** | Prioritizes a one-stop approach to maintain stability in work standards and preserve internal harmony. | Applies a collaborative approach for senior teachers and intensive technical mentoring for novice educators. | Comfortable using a singular style; believes changing approaches triggers social jealousy among the teaching staff. |
| **Teacher Interviews** | Teachers feel their behaviors are treated the same; no special treatment is given based on specific competency needs. | Teachers feel actively supported based on their actual needs (young teachers are mentored, senior teachers are trusted). | Teachers are highly reluctant to consult on teaching issues because the principal always responds with rigid rules. |
| **Observations** | When reporting errors occur, the principal immediately tightens supervision collectively across all teachers. | The principal shifts their control rhythm; loose on macro-academic matters but tight during specific emergencies. | The coaching pattern stagnates year over year, relying solely on uniform monthly evaluation meetings. |
| **Documentation** | Rigid teacher disciplinary documents; instruction disposition sheets lacking any differential treatment. | The principal's daily coaching journal, which demonstrates notes on different approaches used for various staff members. | Internal circulars acting as general, overarching instructions for all educational components without exception. |

The differentiated approach at SDN B was also reflected in teachers' perceptions. Experienced teachers reported feeling trusted to manage responsibilities independently, while younger teachers perceived the principal's technical guidance as relevant to their immediate professional needs. Such differentiated treatment did not appear to be interpreted as favoritism because it was associated with identifiable differences in competence, experience, and task requirements. Instead, teachers perceived the approach as a form of equitable professional support in which everyone received assistance proportional to their developmental needs.

In contrast, SDN A demonstrated a predominantly standardized approach to leadership. The principal tended to maintain a uniform supervisory pattern to preserve consistency and organizational control. As indicated in Table 4, when errors occurred, the response was often to strengthen supervision collectively rather than diagnose the specific causes or needs of individual teachers. Disciplinary documentation and general instructional directives similarly reflected limited differentiation in leadership responses. Although this approach may provide administrative consistency, it reduces the opportunity for principals to distinguish between teachers who require intensive guidance and those who are already capable of working independently.

A similar pattern emerged at SDN C, where the principal expressed concerns that differentiated treatment might generate perceptions of inequality among teachers. Consequently, a relatively singular leadership approach was maintained across different staff members. Teachers reported reluctance to consult the principal about instructional problems because responses were perceived as primarily rule-oriented. The monthly evaluation meetings also tended to follow a standardized format across periods, indicating limited adaptation to emerging professional needs. Thus, the principle of maintaining organizational harmony inadvertently contributed to reduced responsiveness to teacher diversity.

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The evidence presented in Table 4 therefore reveals an important distinction between equality and adaptability in school leadership. Treating all teachers identically does not necessarily constitute effective or equitable leadership when teachers possess different levels of competence, experience, confidence, and task readiness. In contingency leadership, differentiated treatment is justified when it reflects genuine differences in developmental needs and organizational responsibilities. Accordingly, the flexibility demonstrated at SDN B enabled the principal to maintain both professional trust and appropriate levels of supervision, whereas the standardized approaches at SDN A and SDN C tended to produce supervisory rigidity. These findings are consistent with Table 5 conceptualization of style flexibility: "Style flexibility is the extent to which a leader is able to vary his or her leadership style. Leaders who are flexible are able to alter their behavior to fit changing situations."

The concept emphasizes that effective leadership requires behavioral adaptability rather than adherence to a predetermined leadership pattern. A principal may need to adopt a more directive approach when a teacher is inexperienced or confronted with an unfamiliar task, shift toward coaching when the teacher requires both guidance and encouragement, provide supportive behavior when competence is already established but confidence requires reinforcement, and eventually delegate responsibilities when the teacher demonstrates high levels of competence and commitment.

From a contingency perspective, the findings demonstrate that style flexibility serves as a critical mechanism linking teacher readiness to leadership behavior. The principal's ability to identify differences in teacher readiness and subsequently adjust the level of task and relationship behavior determines whether supervision becomes developmental or merely administrative. At SDN B, such flexibility facilitated differentiated professional support and strengthened teacher autonomy. Conversely, the limited flexibility observed at SDN A and SDN C led to standardized supervision that was less responsive to individual professionals' needs.

Overall, the findings suggest that style flexibility is not simply a matter of changing leadership behavior from one situation to another. It involves a continuous process of diagnosis, interpretation, adjustment, and evaluation. Principals who are capable of reading the diversity of their teaching staff can maintain an appropriate balance between control and autonomy, thereby creating conditions that support professional learning and instructional innovation. Conversely, rigid adherence to a single leadership pattern may simplify administrative coordination in the short term but can constrain teacher initiative and weaken the school's capacity for continuous improvement.

## 5. Educational Quality Reflection: Between Administrative Compliance (Paper-Based) and a Culture of Substantive Innovation

The final dimension of the analysis concerns the extent to which differences in contingency leadership practices are reflected in school quality outcomes. Within the context of educational quality management, quality should not be interpreted solely through the completion of administrative requirements, accreditation status, or compliance with formal standards. Rather, it should also be reflected in continuous improvement, teacher initiative, instructional innovation, and meaningful learning experiences. As presented in Table 5, the three schools demonstrate contrasting patterns of educational quality, ranging from predominantly administrative compliance to a more substantive culture of continuous improvement. The data matrix synthesizes evidence from principal interviews, teacher interviews, observations, and school documentation to examine how leadership practices were translated into observable quality outcomes.

As shown in Table 5, the three schools achieved school quality through substantially different processes and practices. SDN A and SDN C demonstrated strong compliance with administrative and formal quality requirements, whereas SDN B exhibited a stronger relationship between leadership adaptability, teacher autonomy, instructional innovation, and observable learning outcomes. These differences suggest that achieving formal quality indicators does not necessarily reflect the same level of substantive improvement in classroom practice.

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**Table 5.** Impact on School Quality Data Matrix

| Data Source | SDN A (Rigid-Bureaucratic Characteristics) | SDN B (Open-Adaptive Characteristics) | SDN C (Formal-Seniority Characteristics) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Principal Interviews** | Feels satisfied because the school successfully maintained its accreditation status through orderly documentation. | Defines quality by the emergence of independent teacher initiatives in creating highly enjoyable learning climates. | Assesses that quality is achieved if all national curriculum targets and official reports are completed strictly on time. |
| **Teacher Interviews** | Compile teaching materials merely by following standard formats to ensure safe verification by supervisors. | Teachers are heavily stimulated to create interactive teaching media and independent projects without fear of making mistakes. | Claim they have absolutely no free time to innovate because the administrative reporting burden consumes too much energy. |
| **Observations** | Classroom administrative displays are highly comprehensive, yet the actual classroom learning process remains dominantly conventional. | Active classrooms utilize Chromebooks and creative reading corners; teachers frequently share best practices with one another. | Learning activities run monotonously, following textbooks; innovations in instructional methods are exceedingly rare to observe. |
| **Documentation** | An "A" (Excellent) Accreditation Certificate; stacks of meticulously neat teacher administrative portfolios. | An Education Report Card showing upward trends in literacy-numeracy; documentation of teacher-made innovative learning media. | Thick, complete school quality administration documents that strictly comply with formal quality assurance instruments. |

At SDN B, the principal's adaptive leadership approach was associated with a stronger culture of teacher initiative and continuous instructional improvement. The principal defined school quality not merely through the completion of administrative requirements but through the development of teachers' capacity to create meaningful and engaging learning environments. Teachers reported having sufficient professional space to develop interactive learning media, initiate independent projects, and experiment with different instructional strategies. The absence of excessive micromanagement appeared to strengthen teachers' confidence and willingness to innovate.

These practices were also visible in classroom observations and school documentation. As indicated in Table 5, classrooms at SDN B demonstrated more active learning environments, including the use of Chromebooks, creative reading corners, and peer sharing of instructional practices. The school's educational report card also indicated positive trends in literacy and numeracy performance. Although these outcomes cannot be attributed exclusively to the principal's leadership style, the convergence of interview, observation, and documentary evidence suggests that adaptive leadership created organizational conditions that were conducive to teacher initiative and continuous improvement.

In contrast, SDN A placed greater emphasis on administrative compliance as an indicator of school quality. The principal expressed satisfaction with the school's ability to maintain its accreditation status through systematic documentation and orderly administrative processes. Teachers similarly reported that instructional materials were often prepared in standardized formats to ensure compliance during supervision and verification. Observation data revealed that although classroom administrative displays were comprehensive, instructional practices remained relatively conventional. This indicates a potential gap between the visible completeness of administrative documentation and the substantive quality of classroom learning.

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A comparable pattern was observed at SDN C, where school quality was strongly associated with the timely completion of curriculum targets and formal reporting requirements. Teachers reported that the extensive administrative workload reduced the time and energy available for developing innovative instructional practices. Classroom observations further indicated that learning activities tended to follow textbook-based routines, while opportunities for experimentation with alternative instructional methods remained limited. Documentary evidence showed a high level of completeness in school quality assurance documentation, suggesting that formal compliance was well established even though corresponding instructional innovation was less evident.

The evidence presented in Table 5 therefore reveals a distinction between administrative quality and substantive educational quality. Administrative quality refers to the extent to which schools fulfill formal standards, reporting requirements, documentation, and accreditation procedures. Substantive quality, by contrast, is reflected in continuous improvement of teaching practices, teacher professional autonomy, innovative learning environments, and meaningful outcomes for students. The findings do not imply that administrative compliance is unnecessary. Rather, they indicate that compliance becomes insufficient when it is not accompanied by improvements in the core educational processes occurring in classrooms.

This distinction can be interpreted through the perspective of Total Quality Management (TQM) in education. Sallis (2002) emphasizes continuous improvement and the development of a quality culture in which quality becomes embedded in organizational practices rather than being treated solely as an external requirement. From this perspective, documentation, accreditation, and quality assurance instruments function as important mechanisms for maintaining standards, but their ultimate value depends on their contribution to improving educational processes and outcomes.

The findings from SDN B illustrate this principle through the relationship between teacher autonomy and continuous improvement. The principal's willingness to provide professional space enabled teachers to take greater responsibility for instructional innovation. Teachers were encouraged to develop learning media, exchange good practices, and respond creatively to classroom needs. In this context, quality emerged not only from compliance with established standards but also from the internalization of professional responsibility among teachers.

Conversely, the experiences of SDN A and SDN C indicate that an excessive emphasis on administrative compliance may lead to unintended consequences when documentation becomes the dominant performance metric. Teachers may prioritize completing required formats and reports over experimenting with instructional practices. This condition can produce a form of compliance-oriented quality, in which organizational performance appears strong at the administrative level while opportunities for pedagogical innovation remain constrained.

The relationship between leadership flexibility and educational quality is therefore particularly important within the contingency perspective. A principal's leadership behavior influences not only how teachers perform assigned tasks but also the organizational conditions in which professional learning and innovation occur. When leadership is sufficiently flexible to recognize differences in teacher readiness and provide an appropriate balance of direction, support, participation, and autonomy, teachers are more likely to develop ownership of school improvement initiatives. Conversely, when leadership relies predominantly on standardized supervision and procedural control, teachers may become more oriented toward compliance than continuous improvement.

Overall, the findings summarized in Table 5 demonstrate that school quality is multidimensional and cannot be adequately represented by administrative completeness alone. Accreditation, reporting, and quality assurance documentation remain important components of institutional accountability; however, they need to be complemented by evidence of instructional improvement, teacher initiative, student learning, and a sustained culture of professional reflection. The comparison of the three schools consequently reinforces the central proposition of contingency leadership: leadership effectiveness depends on the capacity to align leadership

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behavior with staff characteristics and situational demands. In this context, leadership flexibility becomes an important organizational mechanism for transforming formal quality assurance into substantive and sustainable school improvement.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This qualitative study, utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological design, concludes that the comprehensive acceleration of primary school quality in Cluwak District, Pati Regency, is fundamentally determined by the principal's style flexibility in interpreting and responding to teacher readiness. Addressing the first and second research objectives, the meaning derived from managerial experiences across these public primary schools reveals a dualistic reality: a stark contrast between an adaptive-situational paradigm and formalist standardization. Effective leadership style adjustments are brought to life through consistent "situational reading." In practice, successful principals dynamically shift their behavior from a directing (*selling*) style to a highly engaging (participating and delegating) approach, aligning perfectly with teachers' individual abilities and commitments (*willingness*). This precise stylistic adaptation is proven to successfully transform educational quality to a deeply substantive level. It is characterized by the cultivation of an innovative learning culture, the optimal use of digital tools, and upward trends in the Education Report Card metrics. Conversely, rigid governance that leans heavily on a uniform, one-size-fits-all approach under the guise of regulatory compliance actively breeds a culture of pseudo-compliance. This fundamentally reduces the true essence of quality improvement to a mere exercise of completing documentation routines (*paper-based quality*) strictly for the sake of administrative safety.

By interpreting the textual data and the essence of these field experiences, the study identifies several crucial factors that either support or hinder the implementation of contingency leadership. Primary supporting factors include the principals' adequate academic qualifications, the availability of digital infrastructure, such as Chromebooks, and the strong agency displayed by certain teachers, who are independently ready to innovate and collaborate. On the other hand, the dominant inhibiting factor is the stranglehold of rigid bureaucracy coupled with a conventional work orientation. This environment drains educators' professional energy, redirecting it toward compiling official reports and consequently extinguishing their courage to take pedagogical risks in the classroom. Furthermore, a principal's inherent fear regarding staff operational errors frequently morphs into internal resistance. This apprehension triggers communication dysfunction and results in a severely low flexibility index within the school's organizational structure.

Drawing on these operational findings, which vividly capture the educational reality in Cluwak District, several strategic recommendations are proposed for key stakeholders. For school principals, it is highly advised to abandon singular, rigid bureaucratic leadership approaches. Instead, they should pivot toward strengthening their situational diagnosis capabilities. One practical method is compiling periodic teacher readiness portfolios, which can serve as an objective, data-driven baseline for distributing proportionate academic supervision and classroom autonomy. For teachers, there is a strong expectation to autonomously elevate their professional agency and commitment. They can achieve this by actively utilizing open discussion spaces with the principal to escalate information technology-based pedagogical innovations. For school supervisors, we recommend a complete reorientation of the current paradigm regarding institutional coaching and monitoring. Evaluations should no longer overemphasize the sheer completeness of physical files. Rather, supervisors should prioritize clinical mentoring that emboldens principals to creatively forge psychologically safe spaces for their teaching staff. Finally, for future researchers, we suggest expanding the locus of this study. Employing mixed-methods or action research would be highly beneficial for quantitatively testing the effectiveness of contingency leadership training interventions in driving upward trajectories in literacy and numeracy indicators within the Education Report Card, particularly across more geographically heterogeneous regions.

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