

Primary School Principals Leadership to Manage Reading Acquisition, and the Students Reading Skills

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Submission date: 30-May-2020 11:23PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 1334774204

File name: School_Principals_Leadership_to_Manage_Reading_Acquisition.docx (25.93K)

Word count: 2026

Character count: 11925

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the leadership of primary school principals in managing students' reading acquisition. Observation and interviews were conducted with principals and classroom teachers in four schools. A reading test was used to measure reading skills of the students. The four schools were located in three cities in Indonesia, which were attended by students of various socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., lower and middle class, public and private, Catholic and Muslim majority). The results showed that there were no significant differences on perception of reading importance. However, principals had different leadership management styles and had different knowledge of teaching reading. These factors influenced the entire process of reading and learning at school, as well as students' reading skills.

Introduction

It could not be denied that reading comprehension is an important skill for competitiveness of a nation. Capability in reading comprehension could lead to competence in verbal reasoning, which in turn will lead to the mastery of thinking skills. Although training of thinking skills have the potential to increase verbal reasoning (Tiatri & Jap, 2015), reading comprehension is still needed as a basis to higher level of thinking.

Unfortunately, a study conducted by OECD (PISA, 2012) showed that Indonesia was ranked 64th among 65 countries in reading skills. In general, Indonesian students have difficulty in gaining the highest performance in reading acquisition. Considering its importance, reading acquisition has been studied for many years. Experts have established many methods and techniques to enhance students' reading acquisition (e.g., Blachowicz & Ogle, 2001; Gough, 1996; Irwin, 1991; McKenna & Stahl, 2009; Perfetti, 1999; Tiatri, 2010).

Besides the consideration to the methods and techniques of teaching literacy, poor reading skills of Indonesian students could be reviewed from other points of view. One of them is the ways the school principal manages reading acquisition and addresses reading difficulties. School principals have a strategic position and responsibility in the attainment of the students' performance, including reading acquisition. Although the study conducted by Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996) has confirmed that there was no direct effect of instructional leadership on student achievement, they found that principals' management actions indirectly influenced the school effectiveness and learning environment.

Robinson (2007) found five dimensions of leadership practice that were associated with students' performance, which were: (a) setting up goals and expectations, (b) strategic resourcing, (c) organizing and synchronizing teaching and the curriculum, (d) participating in teacher learning, and (e) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. She also found that the extensive impact was met if the principal leadership concentrated on teaching and learning. Research findings supported this notion. For example, Harris et al. (2017) found that in the improvement of instructional practices in Malaysian context, school principals performed instructional leadership through supervision of professional learning.

Lowenstein, Wolf, Gershoff, Sexton, Raver and Aber (2015) used systems theories as a conceptual framework¹⁰ found that the context of primary schools were stable over time, in terms of school strain, school safety practices, school academic performance, school instruction resources, positive school climate, and school violence and crime. Stormshak, Brown, Moore, Dishion, Seeley, and Smolkowski (2016) found that leadership was one key aspect of school-based interventions in reducing risk behavior and increasing academic success.

Although the importance of reading acquisition by school principals has been recognized, there is limited study on the role of the principals in managing students' reading acquisition in Indonesia. Therefore, the current study was conducted in an attempt to answer two questions. First, how do primary school principals conduct their role in managing students' reading acquisition, as well as handling students' reading difficulties? Second, how do these roles relate to the students' reading skills? This study collected data from schools with various backgrounds and various students' reading acquisition level to improve the generalizability of the results.

Method

Participants were four principals at four schools from three cities in Central Java and Yogyakarta, and one city in West Kalimantan, and students from mid-low socioeconomic background and, Catholic and Muslim backgrounds.

Design: Current research is descriptive with the combination of qualitative interpretive approach and quantitative approach. Using these methods, the researcher collected qualitative data from interviews and observations, as well as quantitative data from the students' reading scores. Researchers then analyzed the data to find the similarities and differences of the roles of primary school principals in managing reading acquisition.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using interviews and observations. Besides the interviews with the participants, supporting data w¹⁵ collected through interviews with two teachers in School-1, one teacher in School-2, two teachers in School-3, and one teacher in School-4. Observation of reading behavior and tests of reading accuracy of the second grade students in each school were also

used. Procedures consisted of three phases. First, the preparation phase consisted of conducting literature review, designing research, and obtaining permissions from local authorities and schools. Second, we conducted fieldwork and collected data in four cities. Third, data was analyzed using the qualitative interpretive approach.

Findings

Data analysis showed that there was no significant difference on perception of reading importance. All principals were aware of the importance of reading as the basic skill that needs to be acquired. However, the principals’ knowledge regarding the methods and techniques of teaching for reading acquisition were different. This knowledge was also related to their educational background. Among four principals, only one principal, Mrs. KK from the School-1, had designed and implemented programs to enhance reading acquisition of the students. However, the score of reading acquisition seemed to not have direct relationship with the programs. The score of reading acquisition was related more to the socio-economic background of the students. Table 1 shows the comparison of four school principals in their knowledge of methods and techniques in reading acquisition.

Table 1. Comparison of four school principals in their knowledge of methods and techniques in reading acquisition

	School-1	School-2	School-3	School-4
Students’ socio-economic background	Mid-low +	Mid-low +	Low -	Mid-high ++
Higher Educational background	Master	Bachelor	Bachelor in Theology	Bachelor
Perception of the importance of reading	++	+	+	+
Knowledge of teaching methods and techniques for reading	++	+	--	+
Mean of Students’ Reading Score	+ 58, SD=15	++ 64, SD=17	-- 27, SD=19	+++ 72, SD=12

Regarding the authority and policy of the primary school principals, results were described through five dimensions of principal leadership that corresponded to the students’ performance mentioned by Robinson (2007). All of the dimensions were in the context of reading acquisition. Table 2 shows the principal leadership, which described their authority and policies.

Table 2. *Principal Leadership in the Context of Students' Reading Acquisition*

Leadership dimensions	Mrs. KK at School-1	Mrs. KY at School-2	Mr. GM at School-3	Mrs. SP at School-4
Establishing goals and expectations	Developed programs to enhance reading	Did not develop specific program, but very concern to the development of individual students	Did not develop specific program	Did not develop specific program. There were programs from its founding institution.
Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development	Try to control the teachers' participation in the programs	Assuming that the teachers has their own way to develop the students	Let the teachers do their jobs without any intervention	Assuming teachers have been implementing the directive of the school
Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment	Inviting academicians & local government mobile library	Trying to establish supportive environment	Struggling with external pressures	Following the program from the founding institution
Mean of Students' Reading Score	+ 58, SD=15	++ 64, SD=17	--- 27, SD=19	+++ 72, SD=12

Regardless of the existence or the absence of program at school, the quality of each leadership dimensions of the four schools' principals is described in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of the quality of each leadership dimensions of four principals

Leadership Dimensions	Mr. 16 KK at School-1	Mrs. KY at School-2	Mr. GM at School-3	Mrs. SP at School-4
Establishing goals and expectations	+++	++	+	++
Strategic resourcing	++	+	--	+
Planning, coordinating, evaluating teaching and the curriculum	+++	+	-	-
Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development	++	+	--	+
Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment	+	+	-	+
Mean of Students Reading Score	+ 58, SD=15	++ 64, SD=17	--- 27, SD=19	+++ 72, SD=12

Discussion

Principal’s knowledge regarding reading acquisitions may potentially change the entire process of reading learning at school, and in the end, this could affect students’ reading skills. Based on studies of the four school principals, only one principal put her efforts toward the enhancement of reading acquisition. However, her efforts had not resulted in improvement on students’ reading acquisition, possibly because the research was conducted when the programs were just established and started. Although the school principal had established detailed rules and conducted extensive socializations to the teachers, not all teachers implemented the program as the principal asked.

In general, the current findings support the studies of Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996) as well as Robinson (2007) that school principal leadership has no direct effect on students’ achievement, but have indirect effect on school effectiveness through actions to shape certain schools’ learning environment. Teachers’ knowledge regarding methods and techniques are also important to determine the amount of support given by the teachers. In the case of Mrs. KK, who was the only principal that had implemented programs to enhance students’ reading acquisition, principal leadership had not appeared in promoting and participating in teacher learning and development. She seemed to be very busy in activities outside the schools, and had limited time to participate in teachers’ learning and development. Therefore, in the context of reading acquisition, the roles of principals need to be combined with the teachers’ support to the

principal's program, as well as the quality of students. We also found that the socio-economic background of the students may influence the students' reading skills.

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Acknowledgements:

This research in progress was supported by a 3-year competitive leading research grant from The Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Educations, Republic of Indonesia, and was also supported by Universitas Tarumanagara's research grant. We would like to thank the school principals involved in this project, as well as our research assistants.

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