

The Role of School Principals in Supporting the Improvement of Education Standards through Decentralized Education Management

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Abstract : Decentralization of education management, widely known as school based management, has repositioned the school principal as the central actor responsible for translating institutional autonomy into measurable improvements in education quality. This study examines how principals contribute to the fulfillment of national education standards through the implementation of decentralized education management in public elementary schools. Using a qualitative, literature-based approach, data were drawn from peer reviewed articles, books, and education policy documents published between 2012 and 2025 and analyzed through thematic content analysis. The findings show that principals perform seven interrelated roles, namely educator, manager, administrator, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator (EMASLIM), which jointly drive planning, curriculum management, teacher development, and community participation toward the eight national education standards. The analysis further identifies transparency, teacher commitment, and school committee engagement as the main supporting factors, while limited funding, weak policy socialization, and bureaucratic rigidity remain persistent obstacles. The study concludes that the effectiveness of decentralized education management depends less on formal authority than on the principal's capacity to convert autonomy into accountable, participatory school governance.

Keywords : Decentralization; Education Standards; Principal Leadership; School Based Management; EMASLIM

Abstrak : Desentralisasi manajemen pendidikan, yang lebih dikenal sebagai Manajemen Berbasis Sekolah (MBS), menempatkan kepala sekolah sebagai aktor utama yang menerjemahkan otonomi kelembagaan menjadi peningkatan mutu pendidikan yang terukur. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana kepala sekolah berkontribusi dalam pemenuhan Standar Nasional Pendidikan melalui penerapan manajemen pendidikan desentralisasi di sekolah dasar negeri. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis kajian pustaka, data dihimpun dari artikel jurnal terindeks, buku, dan dokumen kebijakan pendidikan yang terbit antara tahun 2012 hingga 2025, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis isi tematik. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa kepala sekolah menjalankan tujuh peran yang saling berkaitan, yaitu edukator, manajer, administrator, supervisor, pemimpin, inovator, dan motivator (EMASLIM), yang bersama-sama menggerakkan perencanaan, pengelolaan kurikulum, pengembangan guru, dan partisipasi masyarakat menuju

pemenuhan delapan Standar Nasional Pendidikan. Analisis lebih lanjut mengidentifikasi transparansi, komitmen guru, dan keterlibatan komite sekolah sebagai faktor pendukung utama, sementara keterbatasan anggaran, sosialisasi kebijakan yang lemah, dan kekakuan birokrasi masih menjadi hambatan yang berulang. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahwa efektivitas manajemen pendidikan desentralisasi tidak semata bergantung pada kewenangan formal, melainkan pada kemampuan kepala sekolah mengubah otonomi tersebut menjadi tata kelola sekolah yang akuntabel dan partisipatif.

Kata Kunci : Desentralisasi; Standar Pendidikan; Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah; Manajemen Berbasis Sekolah; EMASLIM

INTRODUCTION

The devolution of state authority to local governments after 1999 fundamentally changed how education is managed in Indonesia. Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System reoriented schools from being mere executors of centrally issued instructions into semi autonomous units expected to plan, implement, and evaluate their own improvement agenda. This policy shift, generally referred to as decentralized or school-based education management, transfers a substantial share of decision making on curriculum, staffing, finance, and community relations from the district office to the school itself (Bandur, 2012). The underlying assumption is straightforward: institutions closest to the classroom are best positioned to identify local needs and respond to them faster than a distant bureaucracy could.

In practice, however, autonomy does not automatically translate into higher education quality. Government Regulation No. 19 of 2005 on National Education Standards sets eight benchmarks that every school is expected to meet, covering content, process, graduate competency, teachers and education personnel, facilities, management, financing, and assessment. Several recent studies indicate that the gap between decentralization policy and standard attainment is largely explained by variation in principal leadership capacity rather than by the availability of formal authority alone (Anif, 2023; Dones et al., 2023). Where principals are able to convert autonomy into disciplined planning, transparent budgeting, and active community participation, schools tend to move closer to the national standards; where this capacity is weak, decentralization risks becoming a transfer of burden rather than a transfer of opportunity (Ferriswara et al., 2024).

Within this policy environment, the school principal is commonly framed through the acronym EMASLIM, denoting the roles of educator, manager, administrator, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator. Empirical accounts from elementary and secondary schools across Indonesia describe principals enacting these roles unevenly, often prioritizing administrative compliance over instructional supervision, or vice versa, depending on the resources and social context of the school (Mutiaraningrum, 2022; Dimara et al., 2022). Comparable findings from other developing-country settings suggest that sustained leadership development and active school-board involvement are decisive for school-based management to succeed (Navarro et al., 2024; Zhan & Cao, 2023). These findings imply that the seven EMASLIM roles cannot be treated as a checklist; they function as an interdependent system whose overall effect on education standards is greater than the sum of its parts.

Most available literature, however, tends to examine either the concept of school-based management or the role of the principal in isolation, with comparatively few attempts to map the two together against the eight national education standards in a way that is directly usable by practitioners at the elementary school level. This gap is particularly evident in rural districts, such as those in Banjarharjo Sub district, Brebes Regency, where the present study on the role of the principal in improving education standards through decentralized education management originates. Building on that context, this article synthesizes recent conceptual and empirical work to answer the following question: how do principals EMASLIM roles function to advance the

fulfillment of national education standards under a decentralized management model, and what factors support or constrain that process. The discussion is organized to first present the conceptual framework linking decentralization to education standards, then examine the operational contribution of each principal role, and finally identify the supporting and inhibiting factors reported across the literature.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, literature based design intended to synthesize and reinterpret existing scholarly and policy sources rather than to collect new primary field data. The design was chosen because the phenomenon under review, namely the relationship between principal leadership roles and national education standards under decentralization, has already generated a substantial body of empirical case studies whose findings had not yet been organized into a single operational framework. Data sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and national education policy documents published between 2012 and 2025, with priority given to sources from 2021 onward to reflect the most current regulatory and empirical developments. Sources were identified through academic search engines using combinations of the keywords “school based management”, “decentralized education management”, “principal role”, “EMASLIM”, and “national education standards”, and were retained if they explicitly discussed the principal's function in relation to school autonomy or education quality outcomes. The analysis followed three stages. First, relevant passages from each source were extracted and coded according to the seven EMASLIM role categories and the eight national education standards. Second, coded excerpts were grouped thematically to identify recurring patterns of contribution, as well as recurring supporting and inhibiting factors, using a content analysis procedure comparable to that applied in related qualitative reviews of school based management (Dones et al., 2023). Third, the coded themes were displayed in matrix and diagrammatic form to make the relationships between decentralization, principal roles, and education standards explicit, after which the patterns were interpreted and discussed in relation to the elementary school context that motivated this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Conceptual Position of the Principal in Decentralized Education Management

Decentralized education management, or school based management, rests on five interlocking principles that recur across the reviewed literature: autonomy, participation, transparency, accountability, and initiative (Anif, 2023; Bandur, 2012). Autonomy grants the school authority over curriculum adaptation, staffing arrangements, and budget allocation, participation opens decision making to teachers, parents, and the school committee, transparency and accountability bind that authority to public reporting and internal self evaluation, and initiative allows the school to design programs that respond to local conditions rather than replicate a uniform national template. None of these principles, by itself, produces higher education quality. They function as inputs that must be actively organized and directed, and it is precisely this organizing function that the school principal is expected to perform.

Figure 1 summarizes how these elements are connected. Decentralization policy establishes the legal space for school autonomy, the five principles of school based management occupy that space, the principal's seven EMASLIM roles convert the principles into concrete school practice, and that practice is ultimately measured against the eight national education standards, with improved basic education quality as the intended outcome.

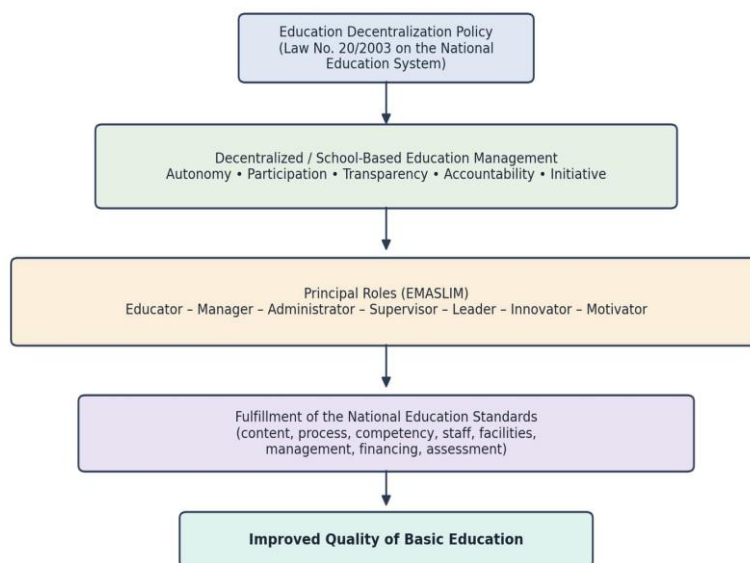


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Decentralization to National Education Standards
Source: Synthesized by the author from Bandur (2012), Anif (2023), and Mutiaraningrum (2022)

How the Seven Principal Roles Advance the National Education Standards

Table 1 maps each EMASLIM role to its core function and to the specific national education standard it most directly supports. The mapping shows that no single role addresses the standards in isolation; the educator and innovator roles jointly shape the content and process standards, the manager and administrator roles shape management, financing, and facilities, while the supervisor and motivator roles are chiefly responsible for the standard of teachers and education personnel.

Table 1. The Seven Principal Roles (EMASLIM) and Their Contribution to National Education Standards

Principal Role	Core Function	Contribution to the National Education Standards
Educator	Guides teachers' pedagogical growth and models learner centered instruction	Supports the content and process standards
Manager	Formulates school strategic and annual work plans from self evaluation data	Supports the management and financing standards
Administrator	Organizes student records, curriculum documents, and asset administration	Supports the content and facilities standards
Supervisor	Conducts academic supervision and classroom observation of teachers	Supports the process and assessment standards
Leader	Builds a shared vision and mobilizes staff commitment toward school goals	Supports the management standard
Innovator	Encourages contextual curriculum development and local content programs	Supports the content and process standards
Motivator	Provides recognition, coaching, and professional incentives for teachers	Supports the teachers and education personnel standard

Source: Synthesized from Mutiaraningrum (2022), Dimara et al. (2022), Ansori et al. (2021), and Bendriyanti et al. (2025)

This mapping is consistent with case evidence showing that principals who deliberately rotate attention across all seven roles, instead of settling into one dominant style, report steadier progress toward accreditation-linked standards than those who concentrate mainly on administrative or ceremonial duties (Dimara et al., 2022; Bendriyanti et al., 2025). The educator and supervisor roles

in particular appear repeatedly as the strongest predictors of improvement in the process and teacher-competency standards, since these two roles place the principal in direct, recurring contact with classroom practice rather than with paperwork alone (Ansori et al., 2021).

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Implementation

Even where principals actively perform the EMASLIM roles, the reviewed studies consistently report that contextual factors either accelerate or stall the translation of autonomy into standard attainment. Table 2 summarizes these factors across five aspects of school operation.

Table 2. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Implementing Decentralized Education Management

Aspect	Supporting Factors	Inhibiting Factors
Human resources	Teacher commitment and willingness to collaborate on school programs	Limited number and uneven distribution of qualified teachers
Finance	Transparent, participatory budget planning involving the school committee	Restricted and often delayed disbursement of operational funds
Community participation	Active school committees and consistent parental involvement	Low community awareness of their formal role in school governance
Governance	Data based decision making supported by internal self-evaluation	Weak or inconsistent socialization of decentralization policy to stakeholders
Bureaucracy	Simplified, school level reporting and decision channels	Administrative procedures still shaped by earlier centralized practice

Source: Synthesized from Anif (2023), Dones et al. (2023), Ferriswara et al. (2024), and Bandur (2012)

The pattern in Table 2 suggests that most obstacles are not technical but relational, they concern how well the principal communicates the meaning of decentralization to teachers, parents, and the school committee, rather than the formal existence of autonomy itself. Ferriswara et al. (2024) found that school committees became substantially more effective once principals treated them as active planning partners rather than as a ceremonial requirement, a pattern echoed in accounts of community based quality management more broadly (Wahyudin et al., 2023, as cited in related SBM literature). Conversely, Dones et al. (2023) observed that even well designed decentralization policies can default back into top down execution at the school level whenever principals lack the confidence or training to exercise the discretion they have formally been given.

Implications for Elementary Schools

For public elementary schools operating in rural sub districts, where administrative support from the district office is often thin and community resources are limited, the findings above carry a practical implication: strengthening a principal's capacity across all seven EMASLIM roles is likely to yield more consistent progress toward the national education standards than strengthening any single role in isolation. Academic supervision without transparent financial management tends to improve teaching quality only partially, since supporting resources may still be misallocated; conversely, sound administration without genuine community participation risks producing compliant but ineffective schools. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 and the role standard mapping in Table 1 together suggest that principal development programs, whether delivered through in service training or postgraduate education, should be designed around this interdependence rather than around isolated competencies

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This review indicates that decentralized education management improves basic-education quality only to the extent that school principals actively convert the autonomy they are granted into coordinated practice across seven interdependent roles: educator, manager, administrator, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator. Each role addresses a distinct cluster of the eight national education standards, and the strongest gains toward those standards occur when principals sustain attention across the full set of roles rather than concentrating on administrative compliance alone. Transparency, teacher commitment, and genuine school committee participation emerge as the most consistent supporting conditions, while limited funding, weak policy socialization, and lingering centralized habits remain the most persistent obstacles. Based on these findings, it is recommended that district education offices provide continuing, role specific leadership training for principals rather than generic administrative workshops, that school committees be engaged as genuine planning partners from the budgeting stage onward, and that internal self-evaluation results be used systematically to guide the annual school work plan. For future research, field based studies that verify this conceptual mapping directly in rural elementary schools, including the schools that motivated the present review, would help confirm whether the patterns identified here hold under local conditions and would extend this literature based synthesis with fresh empirical evidence.

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