



# The role of the principal in improving the quality of education at Al-Azhar Mandiri Palu Junior High School, Indonesia

Muhammad Sarib<sup>1</sup>, Sagaf S. Pettalongi<sup>1</sup> and Askar<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Postgraduate Studies, Department of Islamic Education, Datokarama State Islamic University of Palu, Palu, Indonesia

Correspondence Author: Muhammad Sarib

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## Abstract

This study discusses the role of the school principal in improving the quality of education at a Senior High School in Palu city, Indonesia. The research uses a qualitative case study approach. The data were gathered through field observation, in-depth interviews, and written material analysis. The data, then, were analyzed through the process of reduction, presentation, verification, and conclusion drawing. However, in the identification of themes, we used thematic analysis from Corbin and Strauss. The results of this study indicate the principal of the school demonstrates his ability to effectively perform functions as an educator, manager, administrator, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator. The findings highlight that the principal possesses good leadership skills, who prioritizes the principal's performance by using approaches such as personality and social, educational Leadership, school development, resource management, supervision, appearance, service, achievement, and culture-based education approaches. The school's principal Leadership also reflects transformational Leadership, which can improve the quality of education at the school. The indicators of education quality improvement include increasing students' achievement, stakeholder satisfaction, the quality of teaching staff, and adequate school facilities and infrastructure. This study provides an overview of better school management, in particular, principals' Leadership, regarding the importance of implementing comprehensive transformational Leadership. A school's principal is expected to actively encourage teachers and students to think creatively, innovatively, and critically. A school principal should increase personal attention to teachers and students through coaching, mentoring, and effective interpersonal communication.

**Keywords:** School principal, Leadership, Transformative leadership, Cooperative leadership

## 1. Introduction

The principal of an educational institution, such as a school or madrasah, is a top manager who must possess strong leadership qualities to effectively and efficiently carry out their duties (Dinham, 2005) <sup>[4]</sup>. The principal's duties are extensive and encompass many areas, encompassing not only the smooth running of the teaching and learning process but also all aspects of educational management. The principal is a key component of education that plays a role in improving the quality of education (Saiti, 2012) <sup>[19]</sup>. He is also the highest leader in the school, whose leadership style significantly determines the school's progress. As a leader, the principal must be aware that his or her success depends on others, such as teachers and educational staff. Therefore, the principal's personal characteristics play a crucial role and are integral to the success or failure of the school.

One type of principal Leadership is autocratic Leadership, a type of Leadership that acts dictatorially towards its members (Harms, Wood, Landay, Lester, & Vogelgesang Lester, 2018; Rast Iii, Hogg, & Giessner, 2013) <sup>[7, 16]</sup>. The power of an autocratic leader can only be limited by law. Then there is the laissez-faire leadership type, a type of Leadership that allows its members to act and do as they please; there is no regular organization, and all activities are carried out without planning (Ahsan & Khalid, 2023) <sup>[1]</sup>. However, there is a leadership type that is considered ideal in an organization, namely the

democratic leadership type, a type of Leadership that always tries to encourage its members to work together cooperatively to achieve common goals (Woods, 2004) <sup>[21]</sup>. Relationships with its members are created as siblings, not between superiors and subordinates. In all actions, always prioritize the interests of the group, not personal interests. In general, Leadership is influence, the art or process of influencing others, so that they willingly strive towards achieving organizational goals. The word "lead" means to provide guidance, guide, direct, and walk in front. Leaders behave to help the organization to the maximum extent possible in achieving its goals.

As an educational leader in a school or madrasah, the principal must be able to recognize and understand the various positions, circumstances, and desires of teachers, administrative staff, and other staff. Good cooperation will produce a harmonious mindset in school improvement efforts. The failure of a policy will reflect the ineffectiveness of the principal's behavior and leadership role. The principal, as the commanding officer of the school institution, must also develop and implement policies and decisions that enhance the quality of education. One thing that the principal must pay attention to when leading is the school's vision. This vision should be a leadership attribute of the principal now and in the future. A principal with a strong vision will lead to school progress and will produce a quality school that meets the expectations of the community.

Good Leadership significantly impacts the achievement of organizational goals because leaders influence the performance of those they lead (Drouillard & Kleiner, 1996) <sup>[5]</sup>. The ability to influence a group to achieve goals is part of good Leadership. A principal must be able to lead the school as a whole. In the regulation of the Minister of National Education number 13 of 2007, it is explained that the principal's competence must be demonstrated in daily activities, which include personality competencies, such as noble morals, an open attitude, self-control, and having talent and interest as an educational leader. Then a principal must also have managerial competencies, namely the ability to carry out his duties and functions as a principal, such as preparing plans, developing school organizations, managing school resources, managing facilities and infrastructure, overseeing curriculum and learning development, as well as the ability to monitor, evaluate, and report.

Quality refers to the level of excellence of a product, whether in the form of goods or services. Tangible quality can be observed and seen in the form of the quality of an object or the form of activities and behavior (Oakland, 2005) <sup>[15]</sup>. For example, a quality television is characterized by durability, clear color, good sound, easy availability of spare parts, attractive appearance, and so on. Meanwhile, intangible quality is a quality that cannot be directly seen or observed, but can be felt and experienced, for example, an atmosphere of discipline, familiarity, cleanliness, and so on. And the quality of education is dynamic and will occasionally change, therefore, its nature is relative. The quality of education in schools must be considered and improved to be of a better and higher quality. This is a challenge that must be responded to positively by educational institutions. Quality in the field of education includes the quality of input, process, and output. Educational input is declared quality if it is ready to be processed by national minimum standards in the field of education. And the educational process can be declared quality if it can create an active, creative, innovative, and enjoyable atmosphere so that educational goals can be better achieved. Output is declared quality if the learning outcomes achieved by students in both academic and non-academic fields are high.

Improving school quality is a systematic process that continuously improves the quality of the teaching and learning process and related factors, to achieve school targets more effectively and efficiently (Eide & Showalter, 1998) <sup>[6]</sup>. Total Quality Management (TQM) in Education is a philosophy of continuous improvement, which can provide a set of practical tools to every educational institution in meeting the needs, desires, and expectations of its customers today and for the future. Schools as educational institutions must strive to achieve the demands of the National Education Standards, namely, "Standards for content, processes, graduate competencies, educational staff, facilities and infrastructure, management, financing, and educational assessment that must be improved in a planned and periodic manner".

Therefore, the principal's Leadership is crucial for determining the quality of a school. In other words, leadership models can influence school quality, whether democratic, collaborative, or

transformative. However, in the context of junior high schools, it is not yet known which leadership model of the principal can improve school quality. Therefore, researchers conducted a study on the principal's leadership model at Al-Azhar Mandiri Junior High School (SMP) in Palu. Al Azhar Junior High School is a unique private school because the new student admission process is always carried out earlier than in public schools in the city of Palu. This research is expected to provide academic knowledge to scholars and government officials regarding the success of a private school, which is determined by the principal's leadership model.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Principal leadership concept

The role of the principal is one of the fundamental factors in an organization that determines the success or failure of an institution in achieving its goals (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002) <sup>[3]</sup>. Leadership is not only related to position or title, but also reflects the leadership style, influence, and skills of a leader in managing human resources and the organization as a whole. In the modern world, Leadership is no longer only understood as a form of formal authority, but also as the ability to inspire, motivate, and guide individuals and groups to work together in achieving the organization's vision and mission. The process of influencing individuals or groups to achieve common goals through effective communication, motivation, and management of social relationships.

The principal's Leadership is not only about organizing and giving orders, but also about how a leader can build good relationships with their team, create a conducive work environment, and manage social dynamics within the organization (Constantia, Christos, Glykeria, Anastasia, & Aikaterini, 2023). The principal as a leader is a relationship between leaders and followers. Leadership involves a relationship between leaders and their followers that is characterized by influence and obedience. In this Leadership, there is a relationship between humans, namely the relationship of influence (from the leader) and the relationship of obedience of followers/subordinates, because the authority of the leader influences it. The power of their leader influences followers, and a sense of obedience to the leader arises spontaneously.

In organizations, there is a reciprocal relationship between leaders and their followers. Leaders provide direction and motivation, while followers offer support and loyalty to leaders perceived as capable of bringing positive change (Ilies, Judge, & Wagner, 2006) <sup>[9]</sup>. If a leader possesses high integrity, cares for his followers, and has a clear vision, his followers will more easily trust him and follow his direction without coercion. However, authoritarian Leadership, lacking trust and good communication, tends to create a rigid and less productive work environment. Therefore, effective leaders must be able to build confidence, inspire, and create harmonious working relationships with their followers—Leadership as a Skill and Art in Managing Organizations. Leadership is not merely a role or position; it is also a skill that can be learned and developed. Leadership is "the art of directing, guiding, and developing the potential of individuals and teams to achieve the best results in

an organization." From this definition, it can be concluded that Leadership is a combination of science and art. As a science, Leadership can be learned through theory, strategy, and experience in managing organizations. As an art, Leadership requires instinct, intuition, creativity, and interpersonal skills in building relationships with one's team.

## 2.2 Leadership theory

A leadership theory highlights the relationship between leaders and groups in achieving organizational effectiveness (Horner, 1997) [8]. They define Leadership as a process involving influence, decision-making, and managing interactions within a team. Leadership is the exercise of authority and the making of decisions. This definition emphasizes the crucial role a leader plays in determining organizational policy and direction. Decisions must be based on situational analysis, accurate data, and careful consideration to impact all team members positively. Leadership is the initiation of actions that result in a consistent pattern of group interaction directed toward solving mutual problems. In this context, Leadership is seen as a process that helps teams establish effective work patterns. A good leader must be able to organize tasks, encourage cooperation, and create a productive work environment so that the team can work more efficiently in solving problems. Leadership is the process of influencing group activities toward goal setting and achievement. Leadership is not only about giving instructions or directions, but also about how a leader can inspire and motivate their team to work with dedication and commitment to predetermined goals. This approach is in line with the contingency theory of Leadership, which states that leadership effectiveness depends on the specific situation and the suitability of leadership style to the needs of the organization (Kriger & Seng, 2005) [10].

Leadership is also a process of persuasion and influence, not just the position or power held by someone in an organization. According to Robbins: "Leadership is the ability to persuade a group to work toward a common goal. This definition emphasizes that Leadership is not only about giving instructions or making policies, but also about how a leader can build trust and motivate his team to work optimally. A leader must have strong communication skills, both in conveying the organization's vision and in building interpersonal relationships with their team members—the importance of emotional intelligence in Leadership. A good leader not only understands the organization's strategy, but must also be able to manage his own emotions and understand the feelings and motivations of his team. Effective Leadership requires a combination of empathy, good communication, and the ability to resolve conflicts fairly and professionally.

Leadership is not only a crucial factor in business organizations, but also in public services and educational institutions. He said: "Leadership is an essential ingredient of public services improvement. In the world of education, for example, the Leadership of a school principal is key to improving school quality, creating a healthy academic culture, and encouraging innovation in the learning process. An educational leader is not only responsible for school

administration, but must also be able to build a conducive learning environment for students and educators. Experts also emphasize that Leadership in the public sector must be more oriented towards service and public welfare, compared to Leadership in the business world, which is more focused on profit and productivity.

## 3. Methodology

This study uses qualitative methods. In qualitative research, the use of theory serves as a guide for data gathering and analysis (Nurdin & Pettalangi, 2022; Nurdin, Stockdale, & Scheepers, 2016) [11, 14]. The data was collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and written document analysis at the research site (Rusli, Hasyim, & Nurdin, 2021; Rusli & Nurdin, 2022) [17, 18]. The research was conducted at Junior High School of Al Azhar Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The researcher chose the location based on the consideration that the schools is a private success school in the region. The results of this study can later be a reference as well as a guideline for building a successful school and making the school a sample for other educational institutions.

Data were collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and the analysis of written documents. The interviews involved four mentor teachers, five lecturers, and twenty teacher candidates. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The results of the transcripts were consulted with the participants to obtain their consent (Nurdin, Scheepers, & Stockdale, 2022; Nurdin, Stockdale, & Scheepers, 2014) [12, 13]. The data analysis technique employed a deductive thinking approach, which can be interpreted as a research procedure that generates deductive conclusions from the interviews and field notes. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis from Strauss and Corbin (1998) [20]. The analysis started with open, axial, and selective coding. The final result of the data analysis is the themes found from the data.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 School principal leadership in improving the quality of education

Leadership is the process of social influence by a leader to solicit the voluntary participation of subordinates to achieve organizational goals. Thus, Leadership is the art or process of influencing others so that they willingly strive towards achieving organizational goals. Therefore, a leader can be defined as someone who delegates or influences others to act to achieve specific objectives. Leadership is a characteristic possessed by someone who, because of the tasks they carry out, tries to influence their followers by giving various instructions or directions to organize their followers in a better direction. Leadership is the process of social influence by a leader to solicit the voluntary participation of subordinates to achieve organizational goals. Thus, Leadership is the art or process of influencing others so that they willingly strive towards achieving organizational goals. Therefore, a leader can be defined as someone who delegates or influences others to act to achieve specific objectives. Leadership is a characteristic possessed by someone who, because of the tasks they carry out,

tries to influence their followers by giving various instructions or directions to organize their followers in a better direction.

The principal plays a crucial role in mobilizing various components within the school, ensuring the smooth running of the teaching and learning process. The principal is a member of the school/madrasah staff who guides and shares responsibility with other members to achieve the goals. A superior officially appoints the principal or madrasah head. This principal or madrasah head is referred to as an official leader. The principal's leadership implementation process is carried out through an approach, as expressed by the principal: In the implementation of this Democratic Leadership Strategy, the leader delegates his authority and invites his followers to participate in the decision-making process, so that the approach used is a family approach that shows personality according to procedures that have been jointly established.

Leadership by emphasizing the approach of a person's personality that brings a desire to a group of people to emulate or follow him or that radiates a particular influence, a power or authority, in such a way that makes a group or people want to do what he wants, so that the leadership behavior of the principal is a leadership behavior that describes the relationship between himself and teachers and employees in carrying out school organizational activities, communication channel patterns and the use of clear methods and procedures in the school. Therefore, the principal stated that:

“As a leader in a school, one must see administrative staff and teachers who are knowledgeable, have a vision for the future, meet certain requirements, and can influence group activities and have a role in determining group ideology. Furthermore, it is said that Leadership shows the ability and readiness of the principal to be able to influence, encourage, invite, direct, others so that people accept the influence and do something to help the process of achieving the goals that have been set while not forgetting important parts in the process such as teaching and careful planning.”

Based on the interview results above, the principal's Leadership at Al-Azhar Mandiri Middle School, Palu, encompasses various aspects, such as:

- **Teaching:** The principal must focus on the curriculum and instruction, as well as supervise, analyze, and use data to support student learning.
- **Planning:** The principal must pay attention to the details of the plans to be implemented and coordinate with teachers according to their abilities and competencies.
- **Student-centered learning:** The principal must hold meetings to help teachers reflect on and improve student-centered learning activities.
- **Communication:** The principal must establish communication with all school members, the school committee, parents, and the surrounding community.
- **Supervision:** The principal must supervise teacher performance.
- **Leadership style:** The principal must employ an effective leadership style appropriate to the maturity of their subordinates. Effective leadership styles vary depending on the desire for achievement, willingness to accept responsibility, and the abilities and experience relevant to the task.

In carrying out their leadership role to achieve quality education, principals emphasize three essential aspects: discipline among all members of the school community, fostering a conducive school climate, and effective learning. One informant stated the following:

The key to the success of Al-Azhar Mandiri Middle School in Palu in achieving quality education is inseparable from three aspects: First, discipline, where the principal emphasizes the importance of a culture of discipline in carrying out duties to all members of the school community. This is demonstrated by the principal arriving at school early. Second, attention to school conditions is paid to fostering a climate conducive to effective learning. Third, ensuring an effective learning process by directly monitoring and involving the vice principals in classroom learning.

The principal's leadership role in realizing school quality is responsible for teaching, encouraging, and directing the school community, planning, mobilizing, coordinating, and harmonizing all school resources, and providing support in improving school quality. Based on the findings of researchers, to achieve effectiveness in carrying out management functions, the principal must have three conceptual skills related to the ability to understand and operate an organization. Human skills relate to the ability to work together, motivate, and lead. Technical skills relate to the ability to use knowledge, methods, techniques, and equipment to complete specific tasks. To acquire these skills, the principal must carry out activities such as learning from daily work, especially from the work methods of teachers and other school employees, conducting planned observations of management activities, and reading various things related to activities. Then the principal must also monitor ongoing activities, utilize the results of other people's research, think about the future, and formulate ideas that can be tested.

The principal's learning leadership in the digital era is at least based on several digital skills that the principal must have, namely: digital communication, the ability to manage information and content, digital transactions, solutions, and the ability to maintain digital security. This is important to implement in schools because their ability to build a learning community of its citizens must be able to make their school a learning school. Learning schools have the following main characteristics: empowering school citizens optimally, facilitating school citizens to learn on-going, encouraging the independence of each school citizen, giving authority and responsibility to school citizens, encouraging school citizens to be accountable for their work processes and results, encouraging teamwork (compact, intelligent, dynamic, harmonious, and agile or responsive to the main customers, namely students), inviting school citizens to make their schools focus on excellent service, inviting school citizens to be adaptive to change, inviting school citizens to think systemically, commitment to quality excellence, and making continuous improvements.

Principal instructional Leadership in the digital era requires digital talent capable of motivating the school community to perform proportionally and professionally by their core duties



and functions. Principal instructional Leadership aims to facilitate teachers' improvement in learning achievement, learning satisfaction, learning motivation, curiosity, creativity, innovation, entrepreneurial spirit, and awareness of lifelong learning. This indicates that a principal is not merely required to be a leader; more broadly, a leader must be able to serve as a resource for teachers to explore more information, particularly regarding learning. Therefore, principals must understand and master instructional Leadership. Principal instructional Leadership is an action taken by the principal to develop a productive and satisfying work environment for teachers. Ultimately, this can improve student learning conditions. Instructional Leadership is an action that leads to the creation of a school climate that fosters optimal learning processes. Principal instructional Leadership in the digital era must be a serious consideration for the principal's role so that they can become a driving force for teachers to compete with change. If the principal is not digitally literate, effective Leadership in the school will not be effective.

An organization's success in overcoming various challenges depends on multiple factors. For example, managing its human resources. Managing human resources (HR) is one of the responsibilities and functions of organizational management. The success or failure of an organization's management depends on the success of its human resources. Therefore, the challenge facing management is how to develop the best possible HR management strategy. The success or failure of a school, as an institution or organization, in developing its mission is primarily determined by Leadership. A common saying is that the leader is responsible for the failure of a project. This expression places the leader in a crucial position within an organization. A leader, regardless of form or location, must always be accountable for their Leadership.

To realize the vision and mission of education at the educational unit level, it is necessary to have a competent principal capable of carrying out their functions and roles. Although the appointment of a principal is carried out in a planned and systematic manner, even with experienced teachers or perhaps long-serving vice principals, this does not automatically make the principal professional in carrying out their duties. In some cases, principals are preoccupied with administrative matters that could actually be delegated to school administrative staff. Leadership means the ability and readiness of an individual to influence, encourage, persuade, guide, mobilize, and, if necessary, compel others to accept that influence and subsequently take action to help achieve specific goals or objectives. This is where Leadership plays a significant role in shaping the behavior of subordinates. Leadership is the ability to influence others to achieve goals and objectives. The principal's leadership ability is a key determinant of teacher empowerment and improving the quality of learning processes and products. The principal is responsible for ensuring that teachers and staff perform optimally. The principal's leadership style also shapes school culture and learning in interacting with the community (principal, teachers, and staff).

### **Impact of school's leadership model on school quality**

Education leadership, within educational management, requires a leader to guide, coordinate, and influence activities to ensure effective implementation and achievement of learning objectives. Therefore, every leader within an educational institution will have an impact. Principal Leadership has a significant effect on various aspects of the school, including teacher performance, student motivation, school productivity, and student learning outcomes. Effective principal Leadership can create a conducive learning environment and improve the overall quality of education. Research has identified several impacts of principal Leadership on teacher performance, including:

- Principals who provide motivation and support to teachers can increase their work enthusiasm and productivity;
- Competency enhancement: Principals can facilitate training and professional development for teachers to improve their competencies;
- Creating a conducive work environment: Principals with good Leadership can create a comfortable and supportive work environment for teachers.

Then the principal's Leadership must also have an impact on student learning outcomes, which include increasing student learning motivation. Namely, a principal who can create a conducive and inspiring learning environment can increase student learning motivation. Improving the quality of learning: A principal who has a deep understanding of the curriculum and learning can help teachers improve the quality of learning. Next, the effective use of technology: The principal can encourage the effective use of technology in learning to improve student learning outcomes. An effective principal can also encourage all parties in the school to work together in achieving school goals. An effective principal can build good relationships with the community, for example, increasing good cooperation between the school and various parties in the community. Furthermore, improving the image of a quality school and having exemplary achievements can enhance the image of the school in the eyes of the community.

Based on the results of observations, the Leadership of the principal has a vital role in realizing quality education and achieving school goals. An effective principal can improve teacher performance, student motivation, school productivity, and student learning outcomes, as well as build good relationships with the community. Improving school quality relies on the school itself, applying a set of techniques, which are based on the fulfillment of quantitative and qualitative data according to standards. To see the quality of education, of course, it cannot be separated from educational quality assurance, namely an integrated, systematic, and sustainable mechanism to ensure that the entire process of organizing education is in accordance with quality standards; therefore, according to the principle that:

“Some things that can be indicators of a quality and superior school are: Having input that is strictly selected, having infrastructure that supports the teaching and learning process, and Having competent educators and teaching staff according to certification”.

Based on the interview results and research findings in line with the transformational theory, it shows that the principal's Leadership in improving the quality of education at Al-Azhar Mandiri Middle School is always paying attention to facilities and infrastructure and having qualified staff and teachers in addition to that the principal also always maintains good relationships with school parties as a characteristic of the principal's leadership style as expressed by Fenny Anggraini, S, Pd, Vice Principal of Al Ashar Mandiri Middle School, Palu. The Principal of Al Azhar Mandiri Middle School, Palu, has three styles in improving the quality of education, namely the democratic style, which involves the ability to influence others. The autocratic style is characterized by the ability to control and determine policies. The charismatic style, namely, the ability to inspire others. One informant said as follows:

"Efforts made by the principal to improve the quality of education include transparency regarding the use of school funds. Motivating educational staff to always provide the best service. Providing rewards (bonuses) to educators for their achievements in fostering students. Holding workshops for educators and educational staff to broaden their knowledge. Utilizing LMS (learning management system), such as creating learning videos, learning applications (classrooms, chat forums, quizzes, attendance)."

The system of improving the quality of education by the principal of SMP Al Azhar Mandiri also has implications for a rigorous student admission system. Every new student admission proves this; the selection level is always at the beginning before the National Examination, and shows the number of applicants quantitatively above the maximum average. The student admission system is designed because this school prioritizes quality, so student admission is long before the final exam. Elementary school has opened new student admissions, so the selection system is rigorous based on the exam results of prospective students, according to the ranking. The new student admission system is promoted through social media and the distribution of forms filled out by prospective students, which are then returned via the committee's website. Additionally, announcements will be delivered through the Parents' WA group.

Based on the results of this study, it shows that the system for improving the quality of education at Al-Azhar Mandiri Palu Middle School is by setting student standards, developing the curriculum by adding TOEFL subjects, cross-interest English and mathematics electives, conducting strict selection of teaching staff, placing teaching staff according to their educational background, providing opportunities for teaching staff to develop their competencies through internal training, MGMP activities, and training from the Education Office, providing supporting learning facilities and infrastructure, conducting maintenance programs for facilities and infrastructure, monitoring the quality of learning through evaluation meetings, periodic evaluations, and internal supervision, and taking a proactive approach and involving various elements of society.

## 5. Conclusion

The principal's role as a leader is to create a learning environment that enables teachers to teach effectively and students to learn effectively. In carrying out this role, the principal has a dual responsibility: overseeing school administration to create a positive learning environment, and supervising to improve teacher performance in teaching and guiding student growth. This is an implication of the situational theory of the principal, who is capable of effectively fulfilling his or her functions as an educator, manager, administrator, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator. Improving the Quality of Education at Al-Azhar Mandiri Middle School, Palu, through Principal Leadership, can be seen in improving teacher competency. A teacher competency assessment system is necessary. Teachers are one of the factors influencing the quality of education. Teaching professionalization implies increasing all resources and efforts to achieve services to the community optimally. This demonstrates that the quality of the principal's education reflects the principal's ability to manage the school to improve the quality of education. In line with the school's vision and mission, this can be seen in aspects of student achievement at Al-Azhar Mandiri Middle School, Palu.

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