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EFFECTIVE SCHOOL FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD (EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE)

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Abstract

Efforts to achieve quality and effective early childhood education continue to demand focused attention, particularly in regions with limited resources. This qualitative study examines effective early childhood education institutions from an educational management perspective, utilizing a descriptive case study design involving three schools in South Kalimantan, Indonesia. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model with triangulation to ensure credibility. The study explores three central aspects: the role of principals' leadership in cultivating effective school culture, strategies for managing learning environments, and the implementation of quality assurance systems. Findings indicate that effective early childhood education institutions are distinguished by transformational leadership practices adapted to local contexts, incorporating idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Holistic learning environment management includes the use of learning centers, positive discipline, strategic physical space organization, efficient time management, creative resource utilization, and the promotion of a supportive socio-emotional climate.

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Additionally, robust quality assurance is achieved through the application of Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycles, authentic assessment, detailed documentation, and collaborative stakeholder engagement. The study concludes that the effectiveness of early childhood education institutions is driven not by material wealth or location but by the synergy of adaptive leadership, child-centered learning environment management, and participatory quality assurance mechanisms. These findings offer practical insights for policymakers and educators seeking to strengthen early childhood education in diverse and resource-limited contexts.

Keywords: Effective School; Early Childhood; Educational Leadership; Learning Environment; Quality Assurance

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) serves as a critical foundation in shaping children's character and cognitive abilities, which ultimately determines educational success at subsequent levels (Bendini & Devercelli, 2022; Shavkatovna, 2023). An effective school represents an educational institution that implements quality governance based on principles of transparency and accountability, successfully optimizing all key school elements both within and outside the school environment to achieve institutional vision, mission, and objectives optimally and efficiently (Fathurrochman et al., 2022). School effectiveness encompasses various aspects including school management and leadership, educator quality, support staff, other personnel, students, learning programs, facilities and infrastructure, learning space management, partnerships with surrounding communities, and handling of other specific domains (Mulyasa, 2022). School success can be measured through actual achievements that align with established targets, demonstrating high congruence between real accomplishments and desired expectations. While Indonesia has shown significant progress in ECE development, the implementation of effective schools still experiences disparities across regions and has not yet reached the optimal standards expected.

Despite massive implementation of various educational policies, Indonesia's education quality continues to face complex structural challenges. Limited human resources, particularly competent principals and teachers capable of creating effective learning environments, represent major barriers to achieving school effectiveness (Musa et al., 2022; Lestari et al., 2023). This condition is exacerbated by quality disparities in education across

regions, lack of standardized learning processes, and minimal technology integration in ECE practices, resulting in unequal access to quality education for young children (Wang et al., 2023; Nirwana et al., 2025).

The concept of effective schools has become a focal point of educational research over the past decade, with various complementary theoretical perspectives. Permatasari et al. (2023) and Putri et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of school-based management and the strategic role of principals in creating conducive learning climates, where transformational leadership is viewed as a fundamental pillar in building school cultures oriented toward optimal achievement. Mulyasa (2022) complements this perspective by emphasizing that school effectiveness is supported by creative, skilled, and reflective teachers, whereby the combination of visionary leadership and quality educators creates synergy that supports holistic learning processes for young children.

Research on effective schools in Indonesia has developed rapidly, yet several significant gaps remain to be addressed. First, there is still a lack of participatory approaches that involve all stakeholders such as parents, communities, and local governments in the school effectiveness evaluation process (Timpal, 2024; Maisaroh & Untari, 2024). Second, minimal integration of technology and digital innovation aspects within effective school frameworks for ECE that are relevant to contemporary demands (Isma et al., 2022; Fadillah, 2024). Third, limited studies measuring the long-term impact of effective school implementation on children's development through longitudinal approaches (Hidayat & Haerina, 2024).

The digitalization era and 21st-century competency demands require educational research that is more adaptive, contextual, and interdisciplinary collaborative to generate applicable and sustainable solutions. This research attempts to fill these gaps by developing a comprehensive effective school framework specifically for ECE contexts in Indonesia that considers leadership aspects, learning environment management, and quality assurance systems in an integrated manner.

Based on this background, this research aims to analyze the role of principal leadership in forming effective school culture for early childhood, evaluate effective learning environment management strategies for young children, and examine quality assurance systems implemented by schools in achieving effective school standards. Through a holistic educational management approach, this research is expected to provide practical

contributions to ECE development in Indonesia and serve as an evidence-based educational policy reference for creating Indonesia's golden generation in the future.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design to gain in-depth understanding of effective school implementation at the early childhood education level. The qualitative approach was selected as it aligns with the research objectives that seek to explore and describe complex phenomena of principal leadership, learning environment management, and quality assurance systems within natural contexts (Hardani et al., 2023). The case study design enables researchers to comprehensively analyze best practices of effective schools in specific and contextual settings (Abdussamad, 2021).

Research locations were selected through purposive sampling from three ECE schools that met effective school criteria in South Kalimantan, with consideration for geographical representation including urban, suburban, and remote area schools. School selection criteria included minimum B accreditation, principals with at least three years of experience, consistent academic and non-academic achievements, and recognition from the community and local education authorities. Based on these criteria, three schools were selected: Al Firdaus Integrated Islamic ECE, North Banjarmasin State Integrated ECE Center, and Barambai State ECE. The study was carried out over a four-week period, spanning from April 14 to May 14, 2025. Research subjects consisted of three principals, six teachers, six parents, and three school supervisors selected based on their active involvement in educational processes and ability to provide information relevant to the research focus.

Data collection techniques employed methodological triangulation consisting of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies to ensure data validity and reliability (Rukminingsih et al., 2020; Priadana & Sunarsi, 2021). Participant observation was conducted over one month to directly observe principal leadership practices, teacher-student interactions, learning environment management, and quality assurance system implementation in daily school activities. In-depth interviews using semi-structured interview guides were conducted individually and through focus group discussions to explore comprehensive perspectives from various stakeholders regarding school effectiveness. Documentation studies included analysis of school policy documents, strategic plans, self-

evaluation reports, supervision records, and other supporting documents relevant to effective school implementation.

Data analysis utilized Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing conducted iteratively and continuously (Handayani & Munastiwi, 2022; Safitri, 2023). The data reduction process involved sorting, simplifying, and transforming raw data from observation, interview, and documentation results into more structured and meaningful forms. Data display was conducted through descriptive narratives that enabled researchers to understand emerging patterns and relationships among research variables. Conclusion drawing was performed gradually with continuous verification through member checking, peer debriefing, and data source triangulation to ensure research findings' credibility (Ridha et al., 2025).

Data validity was ensured through four trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in accordance with qualitative research standards (Herawati et al., 2023; Kokab & Hasan, 2023). Data credibility was achieved through source, method, and time triangulation, along with member checking with research subjects to ensure accurate data interpretation. Transferability was guaranteed through thick description providing detailed and contextual depictions of research settings, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts. Dependability and confirmability were achieved through audit trails that systematically documented the entire research process from data collection to conclusion drawing, supplemented by expert judgment from research methodology specialists.

RESULTS

Based on observation results, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies conducted at three ECE schools as research subjects, various practices and strategies contributing to school effectiveness from an educational management perspective were identified. These research findings are organized according to three main research focuses: principal leadership in forming school culture, effective learning environment management, and quality assurance systems implemented to achieve school effectiveness. The following figure presents a conceptual visualization of these three elements as the foundation of effective ECE.

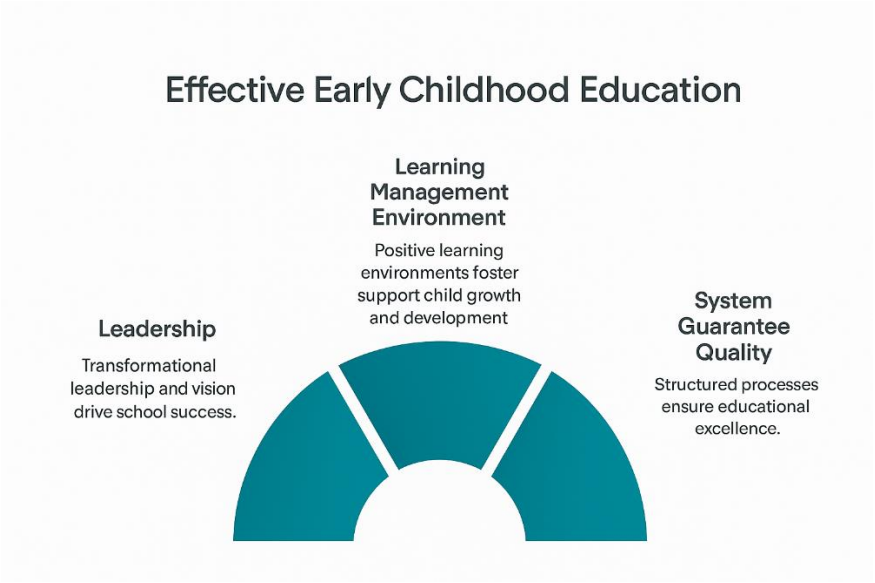

Figure 1. Key Components for Achieving Effective Early Childhood Education

Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual framework of these three key elements as the foundation for effective ECE. This visualization provides a comprehensive overview of how transformational leadership, holistic learning management, and continuous quality assurance systems interconnect to create an effective educational environment that addresses the unique challenges within the Indonesian context.

1. Principal Leadership in Forming Effective School Culture

Research findings demonstrate that transformational leadership of principals serves as a key factor in forming effective school culture for early childhood education. The three principals who served as research subjects implemented leadership styles focused on developing shared vision, teacher empowerment, and creating collaborative work climates. The principal of Al Firdaus Integrated Islamic ECE in the urban area implemented open communication strategies through weekly routine meetings, mentoring systems for junior teachers by senior teachers, and cross-class team formation to develop innovative programs. These practices successfully created a culture of mutual learning and sharing that supports continuous learning quality improvement.

The principal of North Banjarmasin State Integrated ECE Center in the suburban area demonstrated high adaptability in managing resource limitations by optimizing parent and surrounding community participation. Applied strategies included forming active school committees, partnership programs with local SMEs for educational toy provision, and utilizing environmental potential as learning resources. This approach not only addressed

physical limitations but also strengthened school-community bonds, creating strong social support for educational programs. The principal of Barambai State ECE in the remote area focused leadership on developing teacher creativity in creating learning media from local materials and strengthening pedagogical competence through routine internal lesson studies.

Further analysis reveals that all three principals exhibit similar leadership characteristics, namely high inspirational motivation capabilities, intellectual stimulation toward teachers, individual consideration in addressing specific needs of each teacher, and idealized influence through exemplary professional behavior. The school culture formed from this transformational leadership is reflected in organizational values that emphasize continuous learning, collaboration, innovation, and commitment to achieving optimal educational goals for ECE.

2. Effective Learning Environment Management

Research findings identify four main dimensions of effective learning environment management: physical classroom arrangement, learning time organization, learning resource management, and the creation of a supportive socio-emotional climate.

Regarding physical arrangement, all three schools implement learning center principles with clear activity zone divisions, including general reading zones, Quranic reading zones, constructive play zones, art zones, simple science zones, and role-play zones. Flexible spatial arrangements enable children to move freely according to their interests and needs while maintaining structure that provides security and predictability.

Learning time management demonstrates consistent patterns across the three schools through the implementation of daily routines that balance structured and unstructured activities. The daily schedule begins with circle time to build a sense of community, followed by free play time that provides opportunities for independent exploration, then structured learning time with teacher-guided activities, and concludes with reflection time for evaluating the day's activities. This time allocation considers the developmental characteristics of ECE, which require activity variation and accommodate limited attention spans.

Learning resource management demonstrates high creativity from teachers in optimizing available learning media. Urban schools utilize simple technology such as projectors for storytelling and age-appropriate educational applications, suburban schools

develop educational games from recycled materials and involve parents in their creation, while schools in remote areas utilize natural materials such as leaves, stones, and wood for basic science and mathematics learning activities. This diversity of resources demonstrates that learning effectiveness does not depend on facility luxury but on teachers' creativity and ability to adapt media according to local contexts.

Creating a supportive socio-emotional climate becomes the most crucial aspect of learning environment management. All three schools implement a positive discipline approach that emphasizes reinforcement of positive behavior rather than punishment, the use of respectful and encouraging language, and providing equal opportunities for every child to participate actively. Teachers demonstrate the ability to manage children's emotions through simple emotion regulation techniques, create a safe atmosphere for experimentation and making mistakes, and build warm and responsive relationships with each child.

3. Quality Assurance System for Achieving Effective Schools

The implementation of quality assurance systems in all three schools demonstrates a comprehensive and continuous approach through the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle adapted to the ECE context.

The planning phase (Plan) involves developing strategic school plans based on analysis of children's needs, parental expectations, and national ECE standards. This planning process engages all stakeholders through consultative forums that ensure school programs align with actual needs and realistic expectations.

The implementation phase (Do) demonstrates consistency in executing planned programs with support from effective internal monitoring systems. Each school maintains regular clinical supervision schedules, peer observation among teachers, and systematic documentation of learning processes and children's development. Principals conduct periodic classroom visits not only for evaluation purposes but also to provide direct support to teachers in overcoming learning challenges. Comprehensive child portfolio documentation systems enable longitudinal tracking of individual development and serve as the basis for adjusting learning strategies.

The evaluation phase (Check) is conducted through multiple assessments including school self-evaluation, parent satisfaction surveys, inter-school peer reviews, and external evaluation by school supervisors. School self-evaluation is conducted quarterly using

instruments that measure aspects of leadership, learning quality, resource management, parental involvement, and children's developmental achievements. Parent satisfaction surveys provide important feedback on service quality and school communication, while peer reviews facilitate inter-school learning through sharing best practices and identifying development areas.

The follow-up phase (Act) demonstrates the schools' commitment to continuous improvement through the implementation of specific action plans based on evaluation findings. Each evaluation result is systematically addressed through measurable development programs, encompassing teacher training, infrastructure improvement, curriculum development, and strengthening partnerships with parents and the community. The reward and recognition system for teachers and staff demonstrating outstanding performance serves as an integral component of the quality assurance system that motivates continuous quality enhancement.

Overall, the research findings indicate that effective ECE institutions are established through synergy between transformational leadership of school principals, holistic learning environment management, and comprehensive quality assurance system implementation. The success of the three schools in achieving effectiveness does not depend on luxurious facilities or geographical location, but rather on leadership quality, creativity in resource management, and commitment to continuous improvement involving all educational stakeholders.

DISCUSSION

These research findings confirm and expand theoretical understanding of effective schools in the context of ECE, particularly from an educational management perspective. Analysis of the findings demonstrates alignment with theories of transformational leadership, holistic learning management, and continuous quality assurance systems that have been developed in educational literature. However, this study also reveals contextual nuances that enrich understanding of effective school implementation in Indonesia, particularly in addressing diverse geographical, socio-economic, and cultural challenges. To provide a more comprehensive understanding, these three key elements will be analyzed in detail as follows:

1. Transformational Leadership in ECE Context

The findings regarding the effectiveness of transformational leadership by school principals align closely with Bass and Riggio's (2006) theory of four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Harsoyo, 2022; Lamirin et al., 2023). However, this research demonstrates unique adaptations in the ECE context where transformational leadership is not only directed toward teachers and staff, but also involves parents and the community as integral stakeholders in the educational process. This expands the concept of transformational leadership, which traditionally focuses more on internal organizational leader-follower relationships.

The adaptive leadership practices demonstrated by the three school principals in overcoming resource limitations align with Hersey and Blanchard's (1993) situational leadership theory as cited by Rahmiyanti (2020) and Muchtar et al. (2025), which emphasizes the importance of adjusting leadership styles to organizational conditions and subordinate characteristics. Research findings indicate that effective school principals are able to combine directive behavior regarding learning quality standards with supportive behavior in providing emotional and professional support to teachers. This capability becomes key in creating a school culture that is not only oriented toward achieving targets but also attends to the welfare and capacity development of human resources.

An intriguing aspect of these findings is how transformational leadership contributes to the formation of organizational learning within the ECE school context. Rusilowati (2022) emphasizes that learning organizations require leadership capable of facilitating shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. The three school principals demonstrate this capability through practices such as internal lesson study, peer mentoring, and collective reflection that enable schools to continuously adapt and develop according to children's needs and environmental demands.

2. Holistic Learning Environment Management

The findings regarding effective learning environment management confirm Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological development theory as cited in Kurniati et al. (2021) and Mahmudah & Indarti (2022), which emphasizes the importance of microsystems in influencing child development. Effective ECE learning environments function as

microsystems rich in positive stimulation, meaningful social interactions, and safe exploration opportunities. The implementation of the learning center approach found in the three schools aligns with Piaget's constructivism theory, which emphasizes the importance of active learning and hands-on experience in ECE learning processes (Ajeng, 2020).

The integration of technology in ECE learning found in urban schools demonstrates an evolution in understanding developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) in the digital era. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) as cited in Rizki (2022) and Afandi (2022), emphasize that DAP must consider not only age and individual appropriateness but also cultural appropriateness. Research findings indicate that appropriate technology use can enhance children's engagement without disrupting developmentally appropriate learning principles, provided it is implemented with mature consideration of duration, content, and social interaction.

The positive discipline practices implemented in the three schools reflect a profound understanding of attachment theory and emotional regulation in ECE development. Bowlby (1988) as cited in Widyastusi et al. (2024) and neuropsychological research by Manurung et al. (2023) demonstrate that responsive and consistent relationships with significant adult figures form the foundation for children's emotional regulation development and social capabilities. Research findings confirm that ECE teachers who implement a warm but firm approach successfully create a secure base that enables children to explore the learning environment with confidence.

3. Continuous Quality Assurance System

The implementation of the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle in quality assurance systems demonstrates creative adaptation of the Total Quality Management (TQM) model in the ECE context. Shewhart & Deming (1986) as cited in Hadi et al. (2020) and Nuryani (2024), developed the PDCA cycle for manufacturing; however, this research demonstrates that continuous improvement principles can be effectively applied in educational services with modifications appropriate to school organizational characteristics and ECE needs.

The involvement of multiple stakeholders in quality assurance systems aligns with Freeman & Moutchnik (2013) stakeholder management theory, which emphasizes the importance of identifying and involving all parties with interests in organizational success. In the ECE context, stakeholders are not limited to teachers and school principals but also

include parents, the community, and even the children themselves as primary beneficiaries. Research findings indicate that schools successfully integrating various stakeholder perspectives into evaluation and improvement systems tend to be more responsive to needs and more sustainable in the long term.

The use of portfolio assessment and comprehensive child development documentation reflects understanding of authentic assessment in ECE. Helm & Beneke (2003) emphasize that assessment in early childhood must be observational, naturalistic, and focused on learning process rather than just outcomes. The documentation practices found in the three schools function not only as evaluation tools but also as vehicles for professional development for teachers and effective communication tools with parents.

Theoretically, this research contributes to developing an effective school model specific to the ECE context in Indonesia by considering contextual factors such as geographical, socio-economic, and cultural conditions. The model that emerged from this research demonstrates that ECE school effectiveness cannot be measured solely by universal standards but requires indicators sensitive to local contextual uniqueness and ECE developmental characteristics.

From a practical perspective, these research findings provide an actionable blueprint for developing effective ECE schools focusing on three main pillars: adaptive and transformational leadership, holistic and developmentally appropriate learning environment management, and quality assurance systems involving multiple stakeholders and focusing on continuous improvement. This model can be adapted by other ECE schools with adjustments according to their specific conditions.

Although this research provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research focus on three schools in one province limits the generalizability of findings to broader contexts. Second, the use of qualitative methods provides rich description but does not allow for quantitative measurement of causal relationships between variables. Third, the limited research duration has not yet enabled observation of long-term impacts of effective school implementation on child outcomes.

For future research, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies measuring the long-term impact of effective schools on children's readiness to enter subsequent educational levels. Additionally, comparative research across regions or mixed-methods

research combining qualitative and quantitative approaches can provide more comprehensive understanding of factors contributing to ECE effectiveness in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study examines effective Early Childhood Education (ECE) schools from an educational management perspective across three ECE institutions in South Kalimantan, Indonesia. The research reveals that school effectiveness is achieved through synergistic integration of transformational leadership, holistic learning environment management, and continuous quality assurance systems, rather than merely through physical facilities or geographical advantages.

The study demonstrates that effective ECE principals exhibit transformational leadership characteristics adapted to the early childhood context, including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These leaders successfully manage resource constraints through community engagement and creative problem-solving while fostering a collaborative school culture that emphasizes continuous learning and collective commitment to optimal child development outcomes. Effective learning environment management encompasses four critical dimensions: physical space arrangement through learning centers, balanced daily routines, creative utilization of educational resources, and creation of positive socio-emotional climate. These findings indicate that pedagogical creativity and community collaboration can transcend material limitations, demonstrating that educational quality depends more on human resource capacity than infrastructure adequacy. The quality assurance system successfully adapts continuous improvement principles through Plan-Do-Check-Act cyclical processes involving multiple stakeholders. This system integrates authentic assessment practices, comprehensive child development documentation, regular stakeholder feedback, and systematic follow-up actions that ensure sustained quality enhancement.

Study limitations include the qualitative design that restricts generalization, the three-school sample size that limits transferability, and the cross-sectional design that prevents longitudinal impact assessment. Future research should encompass longitudinal studies examining long-term effects on children's school readiness, comparative studies across Indonesian provinces, and mixed-methods research combining qualitative insights with quantitative outcome measurements.

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