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Implementation of Principals' Adaptive Leadership in Addressing Educational Challenges in Indonesia's Frontier, Outermost, and Disadvantaged (3T) Regions: A Case Study at SMA Negeri 3 Ketungau Tengah, Sintang Regency

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study explores how a principal at a remote Indonesian border-region high school distinguishes technical and adaptive educational challenges and mobilizes limited resources.
Methods: A qualitative single-case analysis draws on accounts from four interviewed participants: the principal, two teachers, and one student, with the student transcript interpreted cautiously. An interactive approach to qualitative analysis was used to organize accounts of school conditions, responses, and constraints.
Findings: Participants described prioritization of urgent infrastructure needs, acquisition of satellite internet access, teacher collaboration, and dialogue with families. Technical improvements were more readily described than changes in families' decisions about higher education.
Conclusions: The case suggests that resource allocation and community engagement require different but complementary forms of leadership; it does not establish causal effects or sustained changes in parental beliefs. Originality. The paper distinguishes observable managerial responses from less certain adaptive outcomes in a geographically constrained senior high school.

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INTRODUCTION

School leadership in geographically isolated areas involves more than managing routine teaching and administrative responsibilities. Principals must respond to shortages of facilities, uneven staffing, unreliable connectivity, and limited access to institutional support. These problems are especially consequential when a school is small and its continued operation depends on public confidence. Research on educational leadership emphasizes the organizational and relational conditions through which leaders work with teachers and communities (Karim et al., 2025; Lundqvist et al., 2023; Vanlommel et al., 2025). In this setting, the challenge is not merely to identify what a school lacks, but to determine which responses fall within its authority and which depend on collective learning.

Indonesia's frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged regions are commonly described using the term 3T, although specific policy designations apply to defined periods. SMA Negeri 3 Ketungau Tengah in Panggi Agung Village, Sintang Regency, West Kalimantan, provides an information-rich case of a school operating under difficult geographic conditions. The school profile describes deteriorated classrooms, limited connectivity, and a history of concern about enrollment and institutional continuity. School accounts also describe improved facilities and increased enrollment during the present principal's tenure, but those developments cannot by themselves establish the effects of leadership. The local context therefore invites analysis of the decisions and relationships through which reported improvements were pursued (Yusmandi et al., 2025; Preston & Barnes, 2018).

The principal's reported responses included seeking solutions for damaged classrooms, allocating School Operational Assistance (BOS) funds, and introducing Starlink connectivity. Such measures addressed concrete deficiencies for which resources and administrative decisions could be mobilized. A different difficulty arose when some students and families considered immediate employment more appropriate than university education. In the available interviews, this issue was associated with financial circumstances as well as expectations about the value of further study. Treating

both situations as identical management problems would obscure the difference between providing facilities and negotiating changes in priorities (Heifetz, 2021; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

Adaptive leadership offers a framework for interpreting that distinction. In this perspective, technical challenges can often be approached through known expertise and material arrangements, while adaptive challenges involve learning, competing values, and the participation of those affected. School leaders may have the authority to approve purchases or convene meetings but cannot simply direct families to adopt new educational aspirations. Collaboration is therefore significant both as a way of mobilizing resources and as a possible setting for dialogue (Baxter & Ehren, 2023; Epstein & Sheldon, 2022). This distinction also requires care because economic barriers and value-related concerns may coexist within one decision.

Previous work has examined leadership under disruption, the collaborative conditions of school improvement, and the management of resource constraints. Studies in different settings have described relational responses to disruptive change, principals' adaptive practices, and the role of school culture in leadership processes (Vanlommel et al., 2025). Findings on rural school leadership also emphasize relationships with families and the difficulties of professional isolation (Preston et al., 2018; Preston & Barnes, 2018). These studies offer relevant comparisons but do not automatically explain how a specific border-region senior high school distinguishes a solvable resource problem from a disagreement about education after graduation. A close examination of the principal's accounts and teachers' perspectives is therefore useful.

The analytical gap addressed here concerns the connection between diagnosis and action within one school. Existing leadership accounts often discuss collaboration or adaptation at a broad level, whereas the present case permits examination of how a principal categorizes problems and identifies different responses. The case also allows a comparison between reported physical improvements and the less certain evidence concerning parental beliefs. Resource dependence theory helps explain why the school seeks support beyond its own budget, while social capital perspectives clarify the relevance of trust and relationships (Hillman et al., 2009; Ozturk, 2021; Baxter & Ehren, 2023). Neither framework, however, justifies treating reported participation as proof of lasting behavioral change.

This study therefore asks how the principal diagnosed technical and adaptive challenges, what strategies were reported for addressing them, and which factors appeared to facilitate or constrain implementation. It uses a qualitative single-case approach at SMA Negeri 3 Ketungau Tengah and retains the limits of the available participant accounts. The theoretical contribution lies in examining the overlap between resource constraints and education-related values rather than presuming that the two types of challenge are entirely separate. The practical contribution is a cautious account of how prioritization, dialogue, and external support were combined in the school's response. Findings are intended to inform contextual interpretation rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018; Getnet Agazu et al., 2022).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Adaptive leadership is used here as an interpretive lens, not as a checklist of behaviors whose presence guarantees success. The principal's diagnosis of material and institutional deficiencies corresponds to technical challenges, while efforts to engage students and families about continued education concern adaptive issues (Heifetz, 2021; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). The same issue can contain both types of difficulty, as illustrated by university decisions shaped by household expenses and expectations about employment.

Resource dependence theory directs attention to the school's reliance on actors and resources outside its formal organizational boundaries (Hillman et al., 2009; Ozturk, 2021). Social capital and partnership research help interpret communication, trust, and the involvement of school committees and families (Baxter & Ehren, 2023; Epstein & Sheldon, 2022). These perspectives complement rather than replace the central distinction between technical and adaptive challenges. Figure 1 presents a schematic analytical pathway derived from the study's research questions, showing how reported conditions were grouped into challenges and considered alongside responses and remaining constraints.

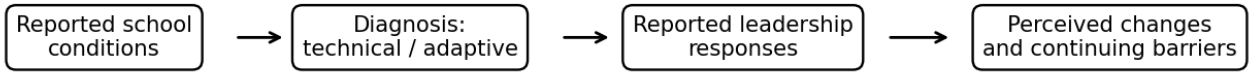


Figure 1. Analytical framework for interpreting the single-case study.

Figure 1 organizes the analysis from the school conditions reported by participants to the principal's diagnosis of challenges. It distinguishes technical problems from issues involving values and learning. The framework then positions reported leadership responses between the diagnosed challenges and perceived changes. The last element retains unresolved barriers rather than assuming that every intervention was successful. The arrows represent an analytical sequence, not a tested causal relationship.

METHODS

Research Design and Setting

The study used a qualitative single-case design to examine leadership practices in their institutional and geographic setting (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). SMA Negeri 3 Ketungau Tengah was selected purposively because its reported history included significant infrastructure limitations, weak connectivity, and concern over its continued operation. The source manuscript records preliminary interviews dated January 28, 2026, but does not provide a consistent fieldwork period for all research activities; no additional dates are assigned here. The study examines interpretations of practice and cannot establish the causal effect of the principal's tenure on outcomes.

Participants and Data Sources

The proposed sampling plan identified 12 potential informants through purposive and snowball recruitment, but the manuscript explicitly identifies only four completed interview participants: the principal (KS), an Indonesian language teacher (G1), a Catholic religious education teacher (G2), and a Grade 12 student (S1). Their accounts differed in format: principal interview notes, a teacher interview transcript, another teacher's written answers, and a machine-generated draft transcript from an approximately nine-minute student recording. The present revised analysis does not treat proposed informants as interviewed participants. Statements previously attributed to proposed committee members, parents, and honorary teachers have been excluded from the empirical findings because the provided method did not establish completed interviews with them. The following table summarizes the relevant evidence reported in the available participant accounts.

Table 1. Available Interview Participants and Data Formats

Code	Participant	Available material	Interpretive status
KS	School principal	Interview response notes	Interview account
G1	Indonesian language teacher	Interview transcript	Interview account
G2	Catholic religious education teacher	Written responses	Interview-guide responses
S1	Grade 12 student	Machine-generated draft transcript	Tentative interpretation only

Table 1 separates the four completed participant accounts from the wider recruitment plan. The principal provides the central description of leadership decisions. G1 and G2 contribute teacher perspectives in different response formats. The student's account has a more restricted interpretive status because the available transcript was machine-generated. Consequently, the number of completed interviews should not be reported as twelve.

Instruments, Collection, and Analysis

Semi-structured interview questions were organized around the research objectives and the adaptive leadership framework. The principal interview guide contained 11 prompts concerning infrastructure, teaching staff, connectivity, community relationships, challenges, strategies, and perceived changes. The manuscript also names observation categories (OBS-1 to OBS-3) and documentary categories (DOK-A to DOK-C), but labels the corresponding observation and documentary material as simulated in the findings. These materials are therefore not treated as independent empirical evidence in this revision. The analysis follows the interactive orientation of data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing associated with Milles et al. (2014); reported issues were grouped into technical challenges (T1), adaptive challenges (T2), strategies (S), and facilitating or inhibiting factors (F).

Trustworthiness and Analytical Boundaries

Credibility was approached by comparing the available accounts where more than one participant described the same condition. No claim of thematic saturation is made for the four completed interviews. The student transcript was not checked against the audio in the source manuscript, so detailed claims dependent on that account are treated cautiously. Reported improvements, including changes in enrollment and community trust, are considered participant perceptions

or school-profile information rather than established causal outcomes. These constraints are integrated into the presentation and interpretation of findings (Tracy, 2026; Yin, 2018).
Figure 2 outlines the sequence of activities described in the methods and the boundaries imposed on analysis by the available records.

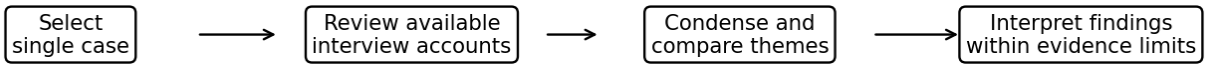


Figure 2. Research and analysis procedure based on the documented methods.

Figure 2 begins with purposeful selection of the school as a single case. It then restricts the evidence base to the participant accounts described as completed. The next stage groups the accounts according to the analytical categories of the study. Interpretations are compared where accounts overlap or diverge. The final stage limits conclusions to what the available evidence can support.

RESULTS

Reported School Conditions and Technical Challenges

The principal and both interviewed teachers described substantial shortcomings in the school's earlier physical conditions and reported improvement during the current principal's tenure. KS described missing facilities and classrooms that had been difficult to use; G1 and G2 likewise discussed infrastructure and teaching-resource constraints. The account also described Starlink connectivity as useful to staff, although interruptions in electricity remained problematic. The student account tentatively referred to work on classroom doors, but it is not used as independent confirmation because the draft transcript was not checked against the original recording. Table 2 distinguishes the reported changes from continuing difficulties.
The following table summarizes the relevant evidence reported in the available participant accounts.

Table 2. Technical Challenges and Reported Responses

Challenge	Reported condition or response	Source	Remaining issue
Classrooms	Installation of whiteboards and partitions; repairs and furnishings prioritized	KS, G1, G2	Some damaged flooring, doors, and windows remained
Connectivity	Starlink access acquired to support administrative and instructional needs	KS, G1, G2	Power interruptions limited use
Teachers	Professional learning community and shared teaching practices described	KS, G1, G2	Shortages in specific subjects and cross-subject assignments
Funding and facilities	BOS prioritization and engagement with community actors described	KS, G1	Resources and land documentation constrained further rehabilitation

Table 2 groups the school's reported problems into physical, digital, staffing, and resource categories. The interview accounts describe concrete managerial responses to several of these problems. Starlink is presented as an access response rather than proof of improved learning outcomes. The teacher accounts also describe unresolved constraints that school-level action could not fully overcome. These patterns support a distinction between initiating practical repairs and achieving complete institutional improvement.

Diagnosis of Adaptive Challenges

KS distinguished issues that could be addressed by obtaining resources from those requiring a change in understanding or behavior. Examples of the latter included students' preference for work over continued education and reported family reluctance toward university enrollment. G1 also associated limited postsecondary aspirations with the costs of study and the belief that secondary education might be sufficient. Such accounts suggest an overlap between adaptive issues involving expectations and technical-economic issues involving affordability. No completed parent interview was documented in the source method, so parents' own reasons cannot be stated as direct findings. The following table summarizes the relevant evidence reported in the available participant accounts.

Table 3. Analytical Classification of Challenges

Category	Issue described in the available accounts	Interpretation
Technical	Damaged facilities, unstable connectivity, staffing and budget limitations	Requires administrative or resource responses
Adaptive	Employment preference, limited interest in university, reported family reluctance	May involve expectations, values and learning
Overlapping	University costs and employment decisions	Economic barriers may coexist with value-related considerations

Table 3 distinguishes categories used in the interview analysis. Physical deficiencies are mainly classified as technical challenges because concrete solutions can be specified. Education-related expectations are treated as adaptive issues because they may require dialogue and a change of perspective. Postsecondary decisions also involve expenses that are not simply matters of attitude. The categories are therefore interpretive and can overlap in a single situation.

Leadership Strategies and Divergent Perceptions

KS described prioritizing BOS expenditures, purchasing internet access, and encouraging cooperation through teachers and the school committee. G1 characterized communication about resources as open and described the principal as responsive to urgent needs. The accounts also described educational outreach and the sharing of scholarship information, but no reliable evidence in the completed interviews established whether these activities changed families' decisions. G2 perceived parental and community engagement as more limited than accounts emphasizing cooperation. These differences show why attendance or contribution to school activities should not be equated automatically with support for university continuation. The following table summarizes the relevant evidence reported in the available participant accounts.

Table 4. Areas of Agreement and Difference Among Completed Interview Accounts

Theme	Commonly reported pattern	Qualification
Infrastructure	KS, G1 and G2 described improvements	Important defects remained
Digital access	KS and G1 described benefits of Starlink	Electricity disruptions and uneven adequacy reported
Community participation	KS and G1 emphasized collaboration	G2 judged engagement less substantial
Further education	KS and teachers described weak university continuation aspirations	Family preferences were not established through completed parent interviews

Table 4 shows that accounts converged most clearly around improvements in physical facilities. Participants also described benefits of connectivity while acknowledging continuing interruptions. The largest interpretive difference concerned the extent and meaning of community participation. Evidence about decisions to pursue university education came indirectly through school staff rather than completed parent interviews. The table therefore separates shared descriptions from questions that remain open within the case.

Discussion

The principal's distinction between technical and adaptive challenges provides the most direct evidence of the leadership orientation examined in this study. Missing classroom resources and weak connectivity permitted relatively identifiable managerial responses, whereas postsecondary aspirations required discussion about values, expectations, and opportunities. This pattern is consistent with the conceptual differentiation advanced by Heifetz (2021) and Heifetz and Linsky (2017). Related school-leadership research describes adaptive practices as context-sensitive responses rather than a single standardized procedure (Vanlommel et al., 2025). Within this case, the value of the distinction lies in improving diagnosis, not in demonstrating that the principal changed family preferences.

Resource prioritization was another prominent feature of the principal's account. Allocating limited funds to urgent repairs and digital access is consistent with the idea that organizational choices are shaped by dependence on resources that the school does not fully control (Hillman et al., 2009; Ozturk, 2021). G1's account of continuing needs suggests that prioritization was necessary precisely because a complete solution was not immediately feasible. Research on rural and constrained school settings similarly emphasizes the importance of local collaboration in the presence of material barriers (Preston & Barnes, 2018; Karim et al., 2025). The practical implication is that budgeting decisions should be assessed against unresolved needs rather than equated with overall school effectiveness.

Connectivity illustrates both the usefulness and limits of a technical intervention. Accounts of Starlink use suggest that the principal identified a concrete barrier and mobilized a technological response. However, continuing electricity

disruptions meant that installing the system did not remove every condition constraining digital activity. Work on digital leadership and learning-oriented leadership provides a relevant context for understanding the organizational use of technology (Araujo et al., 2021; Lundqvist et al., 2023). In the present case, evidence supports reported improvement in access but not a measured increase in student learning outcomes.

Transparency and discussion appeared to be central to how the principal sought cooperation. G1 emphasized communication about school needs and the reasons behind funding priorities, while KS described engagement with teachers, parents, and committee representatives. These practices are compatible with social-capital and partnership approaches that treat trust and relationships as resources for collective action (Baxter & Ehren, 2023; Epstein & Sheldon, 2022). Research on adaptive leadership in school crises also emphasizes communication and collaboration. Yet the study does not demonstrate that school participation extended to sustained changes in household educational decisions.

The accounts of parental engagement were not fully aligned. KS and G1 portrayed practical collaboration in school activities, whereas G2 described community involvement as insufficient. One plausible interpretation is that the participants were assessing different dimensions of engagement, including attendance at school events on the one hand and support for educational continuation on the other. Partnership research differentiates participation from learning-related decisions and helps explain why these indicators need not move together (Epstein & Sheldon, 2022). The available interviews cannot decide between competing explanations, particularly without completed interviews with parents themselves.

University continuation was the clearest issue in which technical and adaptive dimensions appeared to overlap. Financial costs and distance can constrain decisions even when families recognize educational value, while employment preferences may reflect expected short-term household needs. Classifying all reluctance as cultural resistance would risk assigning motives that parents were not interviewed to explain. Adaptive leadership theory requires attention to underlying commitments and competing demands rather than a presumption that individuals are simply unwilling to change (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017; Rahman et al., 2026). Consequently, the case supports further dialogue and targeted information but does not establish that these measures caused changed aspirations.

The professional learning community described by KS offers a further example of working within existing capacity. Teachers reportedly shared practices and responded to shortages through cooperation, yet cross-subject assignments persisted. Studies linking leadership with learning conditions and collaborative culture suggest that such relationships can matter for teacher practice (Lundqvist et al., 2023). Those studies offer conceptual support, but their outcome estimates cannot be transferred to this small qualitative case. The evidence here is limited to reported organizational responses rather than independently measured improvement in teaching performance.

The case contributes a cautious account of leadership under overlapping geographic, institutional, and household constraints. Its strongest pattern is the contrast between clearly described technical measures and less established outcomes for adaptive challenges. This distinction refines the application of adaptive leadership by showing why visible infrastructure repair is not a suitable proxy for shifts in educational values. The interpretations are limited by four completed interviews, inconsistent data formats, the unconfirmed student transcript, and the exclusion of simulated observation or documentary materials. Future studies with completed family interviews and authentic longitudinal records could assess whether relational strategies are followed by durable decisions about further education.

Implications

Practically, the findings suggest that principals in resource-constrained schools can distinguish urgent material needs from problems that require longer-term engagement. The school's accounts illustrate the potential use of transparent prioritization, teacher collaboration, and communication with community actors, while also showing that electricity, staffing, and infrastructure difficulties may remain outside immediate school control. Support for postsecondary transitions should address the information and financial dimensions of family decisions without assuming that parents lack educational commitment. Theoretically, this case positions technical and adaptive difficulties as interacting dimensions of school leadership, rather than mutually exclusive categories.

Limitations and Future Research

The available evidence comprised four completed interviews, not the twelve informants originally proposed. Response formats differed, the student's machine-generated transcript was not checked against the recording, and reported improvements were not established with independently authenticated longitudinal outcome measures. The source manuscript also contained observation, document, and additional-informant material identified as simulated; those materials were excluded as empirical evidence from this revision. These limits narrow the conclusions to the perspectives that could be supported by the documented accounts. Future research should seek direct, completed interviews with parents and committee members and authentic records of attendance, enrollment, and postsecondary transitions where available.

CONCLUSION

In this qualitative case, the principal described distinguishing technical problems involving facilities, staffing, and connectivity from adaptive challenges involving expectations about continued education. The principal and teachers reported responses involving resource prioritization, satellite internet access, collaboration, and educational dialogue. Participants' accounts were more consistent about practical infrastructure measures than about community engagement or changes in families' postsecondary decisions. Financial and value-related considerations appeared intertwined, but direct parental perspectives were not available in the completed interview record. The study therefore supports a contextual understanding of leadership responses, not a causal claim that adaptive leadership produced sustained behavioral change.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

(NTFH) contributed to research conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, interpretation of findings, and preparation of the original manuscript. (HS) and (HL) provided academic supervision, methodological guidance, and critical review of the manuscript. (AYT) and (MW) contributed to data validation, critical evaluation of the findings, and manuscript refinement. All authors participated in the scholarly development of the study, critically reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

AI-assisted language and editorial restructuring was used in preparing this revision. The authors remain responsible for checking factual accuracy, authentic research records, quotations, authorship, and source attribution before submission.

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