



The Roles of School Principals in Shaping Teachers' Pedagogical Competence and Students' Behavior in Indonesia

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Abstract

The prolonged school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted teaching and learning systems. Even after face-to-face classes resumed, schools in Indonesia continued to face residual challenges affecting both teachers and students. This study explores the roles of school principals in supporting novice teachers' pedagogical competence and guiding students' behavioral adjustment in the post-pandemic context. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews and classroom observations conducted in a private junior high school in Batam. Participants included novice teachers who completed online pre-service training during the pandemic and students who had limited prior experience with in-person schooling. The findings reveal that beginning teachers struggled with classroom management, instructional planning, and learner engagement due to the absence of authentic teaching practice. Principals addressed these challenges through mentoring, supervision, and targeted professional development programs. In addition, their leadership helped restore students' discipline, confidence, and enthusiasm for learning. The study underscores the pivotal role of instructional leadership in linking teacher competence, student adjustment, and post-pandemic school recovery.

Keywords: *instructional leadership, school principals, pedagogical competence, student behavior, post-pandemic education*

Introduction

The global spread of COVID-19 in late 2019 brought unprecedented disruption to educational systems around the world. Schools were compelled to suspend in-person instruction, resulting not only in academic discontinuity but also in emotional and psychological strain among both teachers and students who were unprepared for such a sudden transition (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Educators faced the dual challenge of adjusting to online pedagogical approaches while managing inconsistent access to technology and fluctuating student motivation. Even after the pandemic subsided and schools reopened, both learners and educators continued to grapple with the lingering effects of long-term remote learning and the difficulty of re-establishing conventional classroom routines.

For teachers—particularly those who completed their pre-service teaching education preparation during the pandemic through online platforms—the loss of hands-on practicum experience was significant. The absence of authentic school-based internships limited their opportunity to apply pedagogical theories in real-life teaching contexts (Tipton & Schmitt, 2021). Previous studies (Al Abiky, 2021; Jin, 2023; Kennedy & Gill, 2024) have indicated that while online pre-service programs ensured continuity, they did not always provide

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sufficient exposure to the realities of classroom management, instructional delivery, and student engagement. As a result, many novice teachers entered the profession with restricted competence and confidence, posing challenges for principals and school leaders tasked with ensuring teaching quality and student discipline.

In addition to pedagogical limitations, teachers also faced emotional fatigue and technological stress throughout the pandemic period (Davis, 2020; Soncini et al., 2021; Beardsley et al., 2021). The absence of peer collaboration and in-person mentoring further intensified their sense of burnout and professional isolation. Studies have shown that inadequate preparation for digital instruction often led to reduced motivation, diminished teaching efficacy, and in some cases, early career attrition (Adams et al., 2020). These circumstances highlight the importance of strong instructional leadership to support teachers' adjustment and ongoing professional growth in post-pandemic schools.

The pandemic's consequences extended beyond educators to students, whose social and emotional well-being was equally affected. Prolonged isolation, lack of interpersonal contact, and abrupt changes in learning environments resulted in heightened anxiety, loss of motivation, and behavioral difficulties when face-to-face classes resumed (Akat & Karatas, 2020; Bao, 2020; Islam et al., 2020). Evidence also suggests that prolonged disengagement caused some learners to lose interest in academic activities, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds who had limited access to online resources (Viner et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2020). During school closures, many students from low-income families prioritized work over learning, further widening achievement gaps. When schools reopened, learning loss, absenteeism, and low performance remained critical challenges (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022; Blackwell et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the educational disruption brought by COVID-19 had long-term implications for students' participation and social behavior.

Amid these continuing challenges, the role of school principals has become increasingly vital. Effective school leaders not only manage administrative operations but also serve as instructional leaders who guide teachers' development and shape positive student behavior (Park & Byun, 2020). Research shows that successful principals are those who demonstrate adaptability, clear communication, and collaborative leadership, particularly in times of crisis (Guiamalon et al., 2022). These leadership responsibilities are consistent with Indonesia's national policy framework on teacher professionalism, particularly Law No. 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers and the Regulation of the Directorate General of Teachers and Educational Personnel (*Perdirjen GTK Number 2626/B/HK.04.01/2023*), which emphasize four core competencies—pedagogical, professional, personal, and social—and the principal's responsibility to facilitate their continuous improvement.

This research is underpinned by Instructional Leadership Theory, which underscores the role of school leaders in fostering effective teaching through supervision, mentorship, and professional learning (Stronge & Xu, 2021). Within this framework, principals act as key agents in strengthening teachers' pedagogical competence and in cultivating students' responsible behavior as schools recover from pandemic-induced disruptions.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to explore how school principals carry out their roles in supporting teachers' pedagogical competence and guiding students' behavioral adjustment in post-pandemic contexts. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the study aims to provide insights that contribute to the enhancement of instructional leadership practices and to the broader implementation of educational policies in Indonesia's recovery phase.

Review of Literature

Pedagogical Competence

The term “competence” is frequently utilized by numerous individuals in diverse contexts, leading to multiple possible definitions. This term is utilized in two contexts: educator training and job performance. According to Darling-Hammond (2020), teacher competence is best understood as the ability to apply pedagogical theory to real classroom contexts through reflective and adaptive practice.

Pedagogical competence refers to teachers' capacity to oversee the learning process of pupils (Sudargini and Purwanto, 2020). This is a skill that sets teachers apart from other jobs. It is important for instructors to have pedagogical competency because it helps them cope with pupils' issues and characters in the classroom (Aimah and Ifadah, 2017).

Murkatik et al. (2020) assert that pedagogical competence encompasses various domains, including the identification of students' intellectual, physical, and emotional characteristics; the mastery of instructional theories and principles; the proficiency in the implemented curriculum; the organization of classroom management; and the application of technology for educational objectives.

Pedagogical competence refers to a teacher's ability to understand learners, design and implement effective learning strategies, create conducive learning environments, and facilitate the development of students' potential. In the Indonesian context, these global understandings of pedagogical competence are aligned with the national teacher competency framework. Based on the Regulation of the Directorate General of Teachers and Educational Personnel Number 2626/B/HK.04.01/2023, this competence reflects the teacher's capacity to carry out meaningful, student-centered, and inclusive learning.

In this updated model, pedagogical competence emphasizes not only mastery of pedagogical content knowledge but also the ability to adapt learning to diverse students' needs, utilize learning technology, and conduct authentic assessments. Teachers are expected to apply differentiated instruction, implement formative assessment strategies, and cultivate student engagement through inquiry, collaboration, and reflective practices.

At higher levels of development, teachers demonstrate the ability to co-design with students, facilitate interdisciplinary learning, and nurture learners' independence and character development aligned with national curriculum goals.

Therefore, pedagogical competence in this study is understood not only as teachers' mastery of instructional content but also their ability to adapt, innovate, and engage students effectively in the evolving post-pandemic classroom.

Students' Behavior in Post-Pandemic Context

The shift from prolonged online learning back to face-to-face instruction has significantly influenced students' behavior in schools. Recent reports by UNESCO (2023) highlight that post-pandemic behavioral and motivational gaps required sustained school-level interventions.

After nearly two years of remote classes, many learners experienced difficulties readjusting to classroom norms and routines (Akat & Karatas, 2020). Studies reported that students who spent extended time at home tended to display lower participation, withdrawal from group activities, and a decline in social confidence (Bao, 2020; Viner et al., 2020). These behavioral changes often stem from anxiety, disrupted socialization, and the sudden loss of flexibility they enjoyed during online schooling.

In addition to emotional challenges, students in the post-pandemic period frequently struggled with basic school discipline. Research shows that learners who became accustomed to relaxed schedules and minimal supervision during remote study may resist strict classroom

management once they return to school (Beardsley et al., 2021). They may also show hesitation in following institutional rules, such as punctuality, uniform compliance, or respectful classroom discourse. Such tendencies, if not addressed, can hinder academic recovery and the establishment of a positive school climate.

Moreover, prolonged separation from peers reduced opportunities for practicing collaboration and empathy—skills that are vital for healthy peer relationships (Stevenson et al., 2020). As students reintegrate, some demonstrate difficulty initiating conversations, working in groups, or expressing themselves confidently in public settings. These social challenges can manifest as silence, avoidance, or reliance on digital devices rather than face-to-face interaction. Addressing these issues requires intentional programs that rebuild students' socio-emotional competence.

These behavioral challenges underscore the need for responsive school leadership and pedagogical strategies that restore students' motivation and sense of belonging. To respond to these behavioral shifts, schools need structured initiatives that promote resilience and enthusiasm for learning. Principals and teachers can organize engaging extracurricular activities, peer-mentoring programs, and consistent reinforcement of school values to help students reclaim a sense of belonging. Evidence suggests that when educators provide predictable routines and supportive relationships, students' motivation and prosocial behavior increase, fostering a smoother transition to post-pandemic schooling (Kim et al., 2019).

Roles of School Principals

School leaders have essential roles in forming both instructional quality and the overall school climate, particularly in periods of educational recovery. As instructional leaders, principals are expected to provide guidance, supervision, and resources that enable teachers—especially novice ones—to improve their pedagogical competence (Park and Byun, 2020). Leadership practices such as mentoring, lesson study, and regular classroom observations help teachers translate theoretical knowledge into effective classroom strategies, which is crucial for graduates whose pre-service training was largely online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beyond professional development, principals are responsible for creating systems that sustain teachers' motivation and collaboration. Research highlights that supportive school leaders who establish professional learning communities and foster open communication can mitigate burnout and strengthen teachers' confidence (Bottiani et al., 2019). This is particularly important for beginning teachers, who may struggle with classroom management or curriculum planning after limited field experience. By promoting collegiality and facilitating access to relevant training, principals help early-career teachers grow in competence and resilience.

Principals also have an essential role in promoting positive student behavior and rebuilding school culture disrupted by remote learning. They set expectations for discipline, organize extracurricular programs, and cultivate a caring environment where students feel safe to interact and express themselves. Consistent reinforcement of school norms and values, combined with engaging activities, can guide students toward constructive behavior while restoring their enthusiasm for learning (Kim et al., 2019).

In the Indonesian context, these leadership responsibilities align with the mandates of Law Number 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers and the teacher competency standards outlined in Perdirjen GTK No.2626/2023. Effective principals not only ensure compliance with these policies but also translate them into actionable strategies that support teachers' pedagogical, professional, personal, and social development while fostering students' well-being and academic success.

Teachers need to be encouraged and motivated as well as their students. This is because there are several problems with the teachers as human resources during the pandemic time: the case of joblessness, fewer people are interested in becoming teachers because there is no guarantee that working in schools is a good choice, and teachers are retiring early (Lachlan et al., 2020). School principals need to know about this problem since teachers who are stressed and burned out may not be able to teach well. This is because they will be in trouble facing students' misconduct and will not feel confident inside the classroom (Bottiani et al., 2019). To conclude, teachers who do not teach well might have additional problems to cope with, like not being able to handle student misconduct and not having enough confidence in themselves.

Other studies have shown that when students misbehave, it can also stress out and burn out teachers, which can affect their ability to teach well (Wink et al., 2021). A lot of the time, teaching and learning in a classroom are interrupted because teachers spend most of their time dealing with the students who are causing problems. In some cases, principals or assistant principals need to step in to settle the issue. In this case, effective teaching does not work since the goal of successful teaching is to stop pupils from acting out, not to "cure" the behavior.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is much harder to teach well because school administrators must get ready for all the different types of classes that might happen, for example, limited or fully on-the-spot learning in the classroom, fully online classes, and hybrid learning (Bashir et al., 2021). Each type of schooling needs different preparations. In every context, the tactics used to make teaching effective must be varied. This is because the rules and policies for how to teach and learn will be different in each case. Students can be kept from acting out by following rules and procedures.

School principals need to know that there is a connection between how well students behave and how well teachers educate, and vice versa. Here, the tasks of school principals are very demanding to make sure that the two parts do not move in different directions.

National Policies on Teacher Competence and School Leadership

In the Indonesian education system, the professional duties of teachers and school leaders are anchored in a set of national regulations. Law Number 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers establishes teachers as professional educators who are required to possess four core competencies: pedagogical, professional, personal, and social. These competencies apply as the principle for teachers' professional growth and for the delivery of quality instruction across diverse learning contexts.

Building on this legal framework, the Directorate General of Teachers and Educational Personnel issued *Perdirjen GTK* Number 2626/B/HK.04.01/2023, which details the indicators and performance standards for each of the four competencies. This regulation underscores the importance of continuous professional development, collaboration, and ethical conduct in shaping teachers' effectiveness. It also emphasizes that principals should provide supervision, mentoring, and learning opportunities to ensure teachers meet the required standards.

For school leaders, these policies imply an obligation to align instructional supervision and student-support initiatives with nationally defined competencies. Principals are expected to facilitate teachers' mastery of pedagogical practices, curriculum planning, and classroom management while fostering personal integrity and social responsibility. By embedding these regulations into school routines, principals can help novice teachers—especially those whose preservice training was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic—transition smoothly into professional roles, while simultaneously guiding students toward positive behavior and academic success.

From the review of related literature, it is evident that the role of school principals, teachers' pedagogical competence, and students' behavior are closely linked, particularly in the post-pandemic context. These findings serve as the basis for the theoretical framework of this study.

This study is based on instructional leadership theory, which highlights the pivotal role of school principals in guiding teachers toward effective instructional practices and maintaining a supportive school climate (Stronge and Xu, 2021). Previous studies have emphasized that principals' leadership influences teachers' professional growth, classroom management, and motivation (Park & Byun, 2020). In the Indonesian context, the four competencies of teachers—pedagogical, professional, personal, and social—are mandated by Law Number 14 of 2005 and further elaborated in Perdirjen GTK No. 2626/2023. Research on students' post-pandemic behavior also suggests that strong school leadership contributes to students' resilience, discipline, and enthusiasm for learning (Bao, 2020; Stevenson et al., 2020). These theoretical and policy perspectives provide the foundation for developing the conceptual framework of this study.

Instructional Leadership Theory

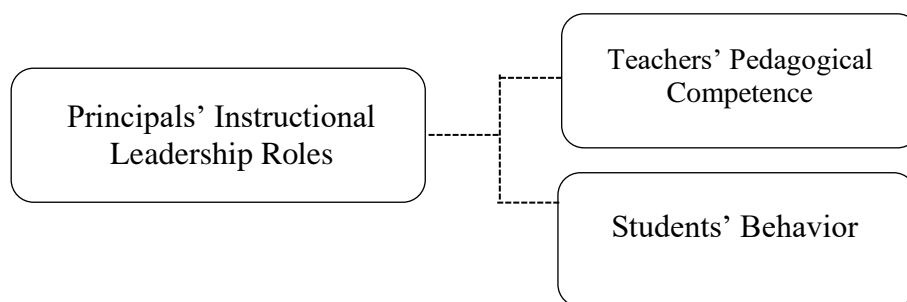
Instructional Leadership Theory provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how school leaders influence teaching and learning processes. The theory asserts that principals play a pivotal role in shaping teachers' instructional quality through supervision, mentoring, and continuous professional development. Rather than functioning merely as administrators, instructional leaders act as facilitators of pedagogical growth who create conditions that enable teachers to improve classroom practices and student outcomes.

Stronge and Xu (2021) describe effective instructional leaders as individuals who guide teachers toward excellence by offering constructive feedback, promoting reflective teaching, and fostering a collaborative learning culture. Similarly, Hallinger (2011) and Bush (2020) emphasize that instructional leadership involves articulating a clear school vision, managing curriculum and instruction, and establishing an environment that supports innovation and learning. Through these practices, principals influence not only teachers' professional competence but also the behavioural and academic development of students.

In the post-pandemic context, the application of instructional leadership becomes increasingly crucial. School leaders must help teachers address learning loss, integrate technology effectively, and manage classrooms with diverse academic and emotional needs. At the same time, they must nurture students' motivation, discipline, and socio-emotional adjustment as part of the school's recovery efforts. This theory thus underpins the present study by framing how principals' leadership practices can enhance teachers' pedagogical competence and foster positive student behaviour in Indonesian schools recovering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building on the theoretical perspectives and empirical findings presented in the previous sections, this study develops a conceptual framework (Figure 1) grounded in Instructional Leadership Theory. The framework illustrates how principals' instructional leadership roles influence teachers' pedagogical competence and students' behavioral adjustment in the post-pandemic context. It highlights that principals, through supervision, mentoring, and professional support, play a central role in strengthening teachers' instructional capacity while simultaneously shaping students' discipline, confidence, and motivation to learn.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study Based on Instructional Leadership Theory



As illustrated in Figure 1, this study posits that principals' instructional leadership roles exert a significant influence on two interrelated outcomes: teachers' pedagogical competence and students' behavior in the post-pandemic context. The directional arrows depict the hypothesized relationships, suggesting that principals, through supervision, mentoring, and professional support, play a crucial role in enhancing teachers' ability to design and implement effective instruction. At the same time, their leadership practices contribute to the development of students' discipline, confidence, and engagement, thereby fostering a more resilient and productive school environment during the educational recovery phase.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore how school principals support teachers' pedagogical competence and guide students' behavioral adjustment in the post-pandemic context. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and perceptions within their natural school setting. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative inquiry is suited to studies that seek to interpret meanings from participants' viewpoints rather than to test hypotheses. In this study, the descriptive qualitative method enabled the researcher to capture authentic insights from teachers and students regarding how school leadership practices influence classroom teaching and learning after the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to provide a holistic portrayal of the phenomenon.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. They consisted of ten novice teachers and ten students from a private junior high school in Batam, an island city in Riau Province, Indonesia. The selected school was chosen because it employs several beginning teachers who completed their pre-service teacher education entirely online during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it an appropriate setting to explore post-pandemic transitions in teaching and learning. Additionally, the school's administrative support and accessibility allowed for in-depth data collection through classroom observations and interviews. The sample size was determined based on access, time, and the need for rich qualitative data to capture participants' lived experiences within a manageable research scope.

As the researcher also serves as a school principal in Batam, reflexivity was practiced by recognizing potential biases and consciously separating personal perspectives from data interpretation. Measures such as bracketing assumptions and maintaining participant confidentiality were implemented to enhance the study's credibility.

Data Gathering Procedures and Instrumentations

Data collection employed two primary techniques: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interview guide was adapted from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's Quality Assurance of Education (Penjaminan Mutu Pendidikan) framework, focusing on indicators of teachers' pedagogical competence and students' behavior. The guide was reviewed by two senior educators to ensure content validity and contextual relevance before data collection. Each participant completed an individual interview lasting approximately 20–30 minutes, conducted in a quiet setting within the school premises. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy.

Data saturation was reached when additional interviews no longer yielded new themes or insights. After the eighth teacher and eighth student interview, responses began to repeat similar patterns regarding classroom management, instructional design, and student adjustment. Therefore, data collection was concluded once thematic redundancy was observed.

Classroom observations were carried out over five consecutive school days (Monday to Friday). The observations focused on teachers' instructional practices, student engagement, and classroom discipline. Descriptive field notes were taken daily to supplement interview data, providing contextual evidence of observed behaviors and interactions.

All participants were briefed about the study's objectives, assured of confidentiality, and asked to sign informed consent forms before participation. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the process in accordance with standard research protocols for educational settings.

Although the research focuses on the roles of school principals, principals were not direct participants in this study. Their roles were examined through the perspectives of teachers and students, who provided first-hand accounts of how school leadership practices influenced teaching and learning after the pandemic. This approach aligns with the study's phenomenological orientation, which seeks to understand the lived experiences of teachers and students in relation to their principals' leadership actions.

Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved several iterative steps. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts and field notes. Second, initial codes were generated to capture meaningful units related to principals' leadership roles, teachers' pedagogical competence, and students' behavioral adjustment. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories, which were then reviewed and refined into overarching themes that represented recurring patterns across participants.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, data triangulation was applied by comparing interview and observation findings. Peer debriefing with two fellow educators was also conducted to verify the accuracy of coding and interpretation. Throughout the analytic process, reflective notes were maintained to document emerging insights and decisions, ensuring transparency and rigor in theme development.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the study and their interpretation. The findings are organized into three major themes:

1. Teachers' struggles with pedagogical competence
2. Students' adjustment after online learning
3. Support from school principals for novice teachers

Each theme is illustrated with interview excerpts and observation data, followed by a discussion of its implications in light of existing literature and national policies.

Teachers' Struggles with Pedagogical Competence

Table 1. Teachers' most frequent answers regarding struggles with pedagogical competence

Struggles	Perceived Needs (as expressed by participants)
Teachers have a hard time keeping order in the classroom.	Several teachers expressed the need to observe how senior teachers manage student behavior, as they lacked internship experience during their pre-service programs.
Teachers believe they lack sufficient knowledge while creating learning materials.	Teachers mentioned that smaller, focused training groups would help them better understand lesson design and material development.
Teachers believe their teaching strategy has not yet suited learners' needs.	Some participants emphasized the need to assess students' learning styles to design more responsive and adaptive classroom strategies.
Teachers believe they know how to organize and carry out lessons, work plans, and teaching approaches, but they don't always do what they say they would do.	Teachers reported needing more opportunities to apply theoretical plans in real classroom contexts through guided mentoring.
Student-centered learning is not yet fully implemented; teacher-centered learning is more prevalent.	Participants acknowledged that they still rely heavily on teacher-centered approaches and would benefit from professional coaching in implementing student-centered learning.

Interviews and classroom observations revealed that novice teachers encountered persistent challenges in applying pedagogical concepts to real classroom situations. Many participants highlighted classroom management as their primary difficulty, attributing this to the absence of field-based experience during their online pre-service programs. One teacher explained,

"I want to observe how other teachers handle students in a real classroom, because I never had that chance during college." (Teacher 3, female, 25 years old)

Several teachers reported limited confidence in lesson design and instructional planning, noting that their strategies often did not align with students' learning needs. As one participant reflected,

"I'm not sure if my method really fits the way my students learn." (Teacher 3, novice teacher)

Others described their pedagogical knowledge as largely theoretical and struggled to translate it into effective practice. They admitted that classroom interactions tended to remain teacher-centered rather than student-focused, indicating a gap between pedagogical ideals and actual teaching behaviors.

While most novice teachers expressed difficulty managing classrooms due to the absence of practicum experience, a few reported greater confidences, particularly those who had short in-person internships or prior teaching exposure. These differing accounts highlight the varied readiness levels among graduates of online PSTE programs.

These findings suggest a misalignment between pedagogical theory and situated practice among novice teachers whose pre-service preparation occurred entirely online. The absence of authentic teaching experience during their training limited their ability to manage classrooms, differentiate instruction, and implement student-centered approaches. This observation aligns with Stevenson et al. (2020), who argued that teachers without adequate practicum exposure often face difficulties in transferring conceptual understanding into applied instructional strategies.

From the perspective of Instructional Leadership Theory (Stronge & Xu, 2021), these pedagogical gaps point to the critical role of school principals in bridging theory and practice. Effective instructional leaders provide modeling, mentoring, and structured feedback that enable novice teachers to develop classroom competence through guided reflection. In the context of this study, the lack of such systematic support during the early stages of teaching amplified teachers' uncertainty and reliance on traditional, teacher-centered methods.

Furthermore, the participants' struggles indicate a broader post-pandemic challenge in professional readiness. The rapid shift from online theory-based education to face-to-face teaching exposed teachers to new realities of student diversity and behavioral complexity. As later discussed in Theme 3, principals' mentoring and peer-observation initiatives played an essential role in helping teachers regain confidence and refine their pedagogical techniques.

Overall, these results underscore the need for structured professional development that integrates theoretical understanding with ongoing instructional support. In line with the Regulation of the Directorate General of Teachers and Educational Personnel Number 2626/B/HK.04.01/2023 (*Perdirjen GTK No. 2626/2023*), continuous coaching and collaborative lesson study can help novice teachers internalize pedagogical competence as a lived classroom practice rather than an abstract concept.

Students' Adjustment after Online Learning

Table 2. *Students' most frequent answers about adjustment after online learning*

Issues	Expectations
Students have a hard time following the rules at school.	Teachers observed that students often forgot school routines and needed repeated reminders to follow regulations.
Students have a hard time switching their moods from online to face-to-face learning.	Many students reported difficulty adjusting to fixed class schedules after long periods of flexible online learning.

Students have trouble making friends and talking to others in and out of class.	Teachers and students noted that social interaction was limited; some students felt awkward initiating conversations with peers.
Students are not eager to take part in the teaching and learning process in the classroom.	Participants observed decreased motivation and passive classroom behavior, possibly linked to prolonged screen-based learning habits.
Since social interaction is hard to build, students tend to be quieter.	Both teachers and students mentioned that many learners remained silent in class and hesitated to express opinions publicly.
Students' self-esteem is going down, especially when they are told to take off their face masks.	Teachers reported that several students felt anxious about showing their faces or speaking without masks, indicating reduced confidence.
Students need to be reminded of the rules repeatedly.	Teachers reported that students often required consistent reminders about school routines, suggesting a loss of behavioral consistency developed during remote learning.
Students often have problems expressing their feelings with teachers or classmates.	Both students and teachers described limited emotional openness, reflecting decreased confidence in social communication after prolonged isolation.
Some students prefer online lessons over in-person classes.	Several students indicated comfort with the flexibility of online learning, revealing difficulties adjusting to structured classroom environments.
When asked to demonstrate civility (e.g., greetings, discipline), students found the practice unfamiliar.	Teachers observed that students perceived formal school behavior as something new, indicating a need to rebuild school identity and norms.

Data from interviews and classroom observations indicated that students encountered notable difficulties in readjusting to the routines and expectations of face-to-face learning following extended periods of remote instruction. Many students admitted struggling

to comply with school rules and classroom discipline, explaining that they often needed frequent reminders from teachers. One participant shared,

"Sometimes I forget the rules because at home I could just join the class any time I wanted." (Student 2, male, 13 years old)

Students also described challenges in maintaining focus and adapting to the structured timetable of in-person classes. Several confessed a preference for online learning, where they felt more comfortable and less pressured to perform. Social reintegration emerged as another recurring issue. Some students hesitated to initiate conversations with peers or participate in class discussions, expressing concerns about being judged or misunderstood. As one student stated,

"I don't really talk much in class because I'm not sure how to start, and I'm afraid my friends will laugh." (Student 4, female, 13 years old)

Teachers similarly observed that students exhibited decreased confidence and participation, particularly when asked to interact without masks or engage in group activities.

Although many students struggled with peer interaction after remote schooling, some adapted more quickly, citing enthusiasm to reconnect with friends and participate in group activities. Such variations indicate that social adjustment was not uniform across learners.

These findings reveal the socio-emotional and behavioral dissonance that many students experienced during the transition from online to in-person schooling. The shift disrupted not only academic routines but also the interpersonal and emotional skills that sustain classroom engagement. Prolonged isolation and reduced peer contact during remote learning appeared to have eroded students' social resilience, a capacity essential for collaboration, communication, and adaptability. This observation aligns with studies by Akat and Karatas (2020) and Viner et al. (2020), which reported that extended school closures contributed to diminished discipline and social confidence among learners.

Interpreting these results through the lens of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) theory (CASEL, 2020), students' emotional withdrawal and behavioral hesitation can be understood as consequences of disrupted self-awareness, self-management, and social relationship skills. Reinforcing these competencies is crucial for rebuilding students' motivation and sense of belonging. Moreover, the role of teachers and principals becomes central in this recovery process. Teachers' ability to foster student-centered learning and emotional safety—skills often challenged by limited pedagogical readiness (as discussed in Theme 1)—directly influences students' adjustment.

From an Instructional Leadership standpoint, school principals play a mediating role by creating a supportive climate that integrates behavioral guidance with emotional development. Leadership practices such as establishing clear routines, modeling empathy, and promoting extracurricular engagement can help restore students' confidence and discipline. This interconnection across groups demonstrates that effective leadership indirectly enhances students' behavioral adaptation by empowering teachers to manage learning environments more sensitively and responsively.

Consistent with Regulation of the Directorate General of Teachers and Educational Personnel Number 2626/B/HK.04.01/2023 (*Perdirjen GTK No. 2626/2023*), these findings emphasize that post-pandemic recovery in schools must address both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. Structured activities that combine academic instruction with social-emotional reinforcement can help students internalize school norms, rebuild peer relationships, and rediscover enthusiasm for learning within the classroom community.

Support from School Principals for Novice Teachers

Participants consistently emphasized the vital role of school principals in supporting their transition from online pre-service training to the realities of classroom teaching. Teachers described receiving constructive feedback on lesson planning, guidance during classroom observations, and advice on managing student behavior. Several participants mentioned that principals facilitated informal mentoring sessions, encouraged peer observation, and organized short workshops focused on practical teaching strategies. One participant recalled,

“When I struggled with a noisy class, the principal stayed with me, showed how to use simple cues, and even paired me with an experienced teacher for a week.”

Such support was perceived as instrumental in building teachers' confidence and motivation to refine their instructional approaches.

These findings highlight the pivotal role of principals' instructional leadership in strengthening novice teachers' pedagogical competence and overall professional growth. The mentoring and modeling practices described by participants reflect the essence of Instructional Leadership Theory (Stronge & Xu, 2021), which positions principals as facilitators of effective teaching rather than administrative supervisors. Through coaching, collaborative reflection, and hands-on feedback, principals help teachers translate theoretical knowledge into practical expertise—a process particularly crucial for educators whose pre-service preparation was fully online during the pandemic.

From a broader analytical perspective, these leadership practices mediate the gap between pedagogical theory and classroom application, a challenge that was evident in Theme 1. By observing principals' model classroom management and lesson delivery, novice teachers internalized practical teaching habits that improved their confidence and instructional agility. This professional empowerment, in turn, positively affected students' behavioral and emotional adjustment—illustrating the interconnectedness across all three themes of this study. When teachers feel supported and capable, they are better equipped to create emotionally safe and structured classrooms, enabling students to rebuild engagement and discipline (as discussed in Theme 2).

This pattern aligns with previous studies emphasizing that effective instructional leadership fosters a culture of continuous learning and reflection (Park & Byun, 2020; Hallinger, 2011). In the Indonesian context, these practices resonate with the competencies outlined in Law No. 14 of 2005 and the Regulation of the Directorate General of Teachers and Educational Personnel Number 2626/B/HK.04.01/2023 (*Perdirjen GTK No. 2626/2023*), both of which mandate school leaders to nurture teachers' pedagogical, professional, personal, and social competence. Principals' consistent mentoring and feedback mechanisms not only fulfill policy expectations but also operationalize leadership as a collaborative and transformative process.

Overall, the findings reaffirm that instructional leadership acts as the connective tissue in post-pandemic educational recovery—linking teacher competence, student adjustment, and institutional resilience. Schools that sustain professional learning communities, reflective supervision, and peer mentoring systems can ensure that teachers and students alike adapt successfully to the demands of face-to-face education in a rapidly evolving post-pandemic environment.

The findings of this study reveal a dynamic interplay between school leadership, teachers' pedagogical competence, and students' post-pandemic adjustment. Together, the three themes—teachers' struggles with pedagogical competence, students' behavioral and emotional adaptation, and the supportive role of school principals—form a coherent narrative of educational recovery.

At a deeper level, the data indicate that the pandemic disrupted not only instructional routines but also the developmental continuity of teachers and students. Novice teachers, whose pre-service education occurred entirely online, entered classrooms with limited experiential grounding, resulting in a misalignment between pedagogical theory and practical enactment. Students, on the other hand, exhibited social withdrawal, diminished motivation, and a weakened sense of discipline. These parallel challenges underscore the fragile ecosystem of post-pandemic schooling—where teacher preparedness and student behavior are mutually reinforcing.

Within this context, principals' instructional leadership emerged as a stabilizing force. Through mentoring, observation, and feedback, principals mediated the gap between theoretical preparation and lived classroom practice, directly improving teachers' instructional confidence and indirectly influencing students' behavioral recovery. This finding resonates with Instructional Leadership Theory (Stronge & Xu, 2021), which positions effective leadership as a process of scaffolding professional and emotional growth. It also reflects Vygotskian social constructivism, wherein learning and competence are co-constructed through guided interaction and reflective dialogue.

From a policy perspective, the interplay among these three elements mirrors Indonesia's national teacher standards, as outlined in Law No. 14 of 2005 and the Regulation of the Directorate General of Teachers and Educational Personnel Number 2626/B/HK.04.01/2023 (*Perdirjen GTK No. 2626/2023*). These frameworks mandate that principals not only supervise but also cultivate teachers' pedagogical, professional, personal, and social competencies. The present findings provide empirical evidence that such leadership practices translate directly into improved teacher performance and student well-being—key indicators of post-pandemic educational resilience.

In sum, this study demonstrates that the post-pandemic recovery of schooling relies on the interconnectedness of leadership, instruction, and student development. By aligning leadership practices with pedagogical competence and socio-emotional support, schools can rebuild a sense of continuity, purpose, and belonging for both teachers and learners. The next section presents the Conclusion and Implications, synthesizing these insights into actionable recommendations for practice and policy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the roles of school principals in supporting novice teachers' pedagogical competence and guiding students' behavioral adjustment in post-pandemic Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative design, the findings revealed a close interconnection among leadership practices, teacher development, and student adaptation. The results highlight that effective instructional leadership acts as a bridge between teachers' theoretical preparation and the realities of classroom practice while also restoring students' confidence, discipline, and enthusiasm for learning.

At the core of this process lies the principal's instructional and emotional guidance, which helps teachers transform pedagogical theory into responsive and student-centered teaching. Mentoring, classroom observation, and continuous feedback were found to reinforce novice teachers' professional confidence and competence. These leadership practices not only enhance instructional quality but also foster a more stable and engaging school environment that promotes students' socio-emotional well-being.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings affirm the relevance of Instructional Leadership Theory (Stronge & Xu, 2021), which emphasizes that leadership effectiveness depends on the ability to influence teaching and learning processes through supervision, feedback, and professional development. Moreover, the results echo social constructivist

perspectives, suggesting that both teachers and students rebuild competence and confidence through supportive interactions within their school community.

From a policy perspective, the study offers empirical reinforcement for Law No. 14 of 2005 and the Regulation of the Directorate General of Teachers and Educational Personnel Number 2626/B/HK.04.01/2023 (*Perdirjen GTK No. 2626/2023*), which mandates principals to cultivate teachers' pedagogical, professional, personal, and social competencies. By aligning leadership practices with these national standards, schools can strengthen professional learning ecosystems that accelerate post-pandemic recovery. This alignment ensures that teacher growth and student well-being are developed not in isolation, but through coordinated and sustained leadership actions.

In conclusion, the post-pandemic recovery of education depends on how well school leadership connects instructional improvement with human development. Principals who create a culture of mentorship, collaboration, and reflection enable teachers to internalize pedagogical competence while empowering students to reengage meaningfully in learning. The interplay among these dimensions—leadership, teaching, and learning—forms the foundation of resilient, future-oriented schools.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings yield several implications for educational leaders and policymakers.

1. Institutionalizing mentoring systems. Schools should formalize mentoring and peer-observation programs that focus on lesson design, classroom management, and differentiated instruction for novice teachers.
2. Integrating socio-emotional learning. Student-support initiatives—such as counseling, character education, and extracurricular engagement—should be embedded within school routines to strengthen students' behavioral recovery.
3. Leadership capacity building. Education authorities need to provide ongoing training for principals in instructional supervision, feedback techniques, and emotional intelligence to enhance their capacity as learning leaders.
4. Policy alignment and resource allocation. Ministries and local education offices should allocate targeted funding and professional development resources to ensure the implementation of the Regulation of the Directorate General of Teachers and Educational Personnel Number 2626/B/HK.04.01/2023 (*Perdirjen GTK No. 2626/2023*) and other related policies are sustained.

Collectively, these recommendations stress that successful post-pandemic education reform requires a holistic approach—one that integrates pedagogical development, emotional recovery, and strategic leadership at all school levels.

Future investigations could examine how different leadership styles (e.g., transformational or distributed leadership) interact with teachers' experience levels and institutional settings. Comparative studies between public and private schools may also reveal variations in support systems and leadership practices. Longitudinal research is particularly encouraged to trace how teachers' competence and students' socio-emotional adjustment evolve as post-pandemic schooling becomes more stable and technologically integrated.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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