

# Strategic Principal Leadership in Enhancing Teacher Performance: A Case Study of a Remote Plantation-Based Junior High School in Indonesia

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**ABSTRACT.** This study aims to deeply explore the role of the principal in improving teacher performance by emphasising three main approaches: managerial, supervisory, and motivational. This study employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five teachers with more than ten years of work experience. Data were then verified through classroom observations and school document analysis to ensure the validity of the information. Data analysis was conducted using thematic techniques to identify patterns of the principal's role in daily practice. The results indicate that the principal strategically builds a conducive work environment, provides clear direction through academic supervision, and encourages teacher motivation with rewards and professional development opportunities. Collaboration between the principal and teachers has been shown to increase the effectiveness of the learning process and help schools achieve educational quality targets. This study concludes that effective principal leadership is a determining factor in successful teacher performance in remote areas. The implications of this study emphasise the importance of principal leadership competency development programs and provide input for formulating educational policies in areas with similar characteristics.

**Keywords:** *Education quality, Motivation, School Principal, Supervision, Teacher performance*

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as the foundation for human resource development and national progress (Greenland et al., 2022; Rahman, 2023; Shah & Steinberg, 2021). As frontline school actors, teachers ensure teaching quality and improve student learning outcomes (Wiyono et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024). Improvements in teaching quality, such as workshops and collaboration, pedagogical skills, and problem-solving abilities of teachers cannot be separated from continuous professional development (Ambon et al., 2024; Gore et al., 2017). As a result, teacher performance is a crucial indicator of the success and sustainability of education (Amzat, 2017; Climaco, 1992; Rahmannisa & Santosa, 2022). Therefore, strengthening teacher performance is important for school effectiveness and promoting broader educational equity.

Teacher performance is a multidimensional construct that includes professionalism, teaching readiness, pedagogical innovation, and responsibility in academic and administrative tasks (Hoidn

& Klemenčič, 2020). However, maintaining this performance is challenging in remote and resource-limited schools (Maher & Prescott, 2017). Limited access to professional training often restricts the improvement of pedagogical competencies, while inadequate facilities hinder the implementation of effective learning strategies (Main & Slater, 2022). In addition, logistical constraints such as geographical isolation and infrastructure limitations exacerbate educational practice gaps (Shin et al., 2022). These obstacles create unequal teaching conditions, reducing teachers' opportunities to maintain optimal instructional quality.

In geographically isolated schools, teachers often face challenges related to learning readiness, consistency in administrative tasks, limited pedagogical innovation, and low participation in school programs (Luschei & Zubaidah, 2012; M Owen et al., 2020). These conditions impact the quality of learning and widen the gap in education quality between urban and remote areas (Patahuddin et al., 2022). Limited resources, access to professional training, and minimal infrastructure support further complicate the situation, resulting in teachers working in conditions that do not support professional development or instructional effectiveness. Therefore, the question arises, to what extent are principals capable of carrying out the role of transformative leadership? Transformative leadership is seen as crucial because it emphasises vision, motivation, and empowerment, which have the potential to act as catalysts for improving teacher performance despite limitations (Firmansyah et al., 2022).

Various studies have confirmed that school leadership influences teacher motivation, commitment, and work effectiveness (Alzoraiki et al., 2023; Mansor et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2020). These findings prove that appropriate leadership styles can create conducive learning environments and improve educational quality. However, most of these studies focus on public schools in urban areas or institutions with relatively adequate resources. It leaves a gap in knowledge regarding leadership practices in community-based private schools operating in remote areas. These schools face unique challenges, including structural limitations, access to facilities, and sociocultural influences that differ significantly from urban contexts.

Previous research consistently shows that transformational leadership significantly improves teacher morale, motivation, and commitment to their professional duties (Corrigan & Merry, 2022; Rahmannisa & Santosa, 2022; Siahaan et al., 2023). Furthermore, participatory and communicative leadership styles have also been positively correlated with improved teacher performance, as they create a collaborative work climate and strengthen a sense of belonging to the school organisation (Mbua, 2023; Saleem et al., 2020). These findings confirm that leadership styles oriented toward collaboration and empowerment are key to enhancing instructional effectiveness. However, most of these studies have focused on schools with relatively adequate access to resources. Knowledge about how transformational and participatory leadership models are implemented in schools with limited facilities or geographical isolation remains limited, opening up opportunities for further research to address this gap.

This research focuses on SMP Eka Tjipta BPLP, a community-based private school located in a plantation area in Indragiri Hilir Regency, Indonesia. Teachers in this environment face systemic obstacles, including isolation, lack of professional development, and limited infrastructure. Consequently, principals must act as administrators, managers, supervisors, and motivators, adapting their leadership styles to unique sociocultural realities. This study examines how the principal of SMP Eka Tjipta BPLP exercises leadership to guide, support, and motivate teachers in overcoming contextual barriers to performance.

## METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore leadership dynamics in a naturalistic school context. This design was chosen because it allowed the researcher to capture participants' lived experiences and interpret social phenomena holistically (Aspers & Corte, 2019;

Awasthy, 2019) The researcher acted as the primary instrument, engaging directly and reflectively with the field, while maintaining reflexivity to minimise subjectivity. Various strategies, such as triangulation of data sources and methods, member checking, and audit trails, were applied to enhance credibility.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in school leadership and teacher performance improvement efforts. The informants comprised the principal, three vice principals (curriculum, student affairs, and community relations), and six full-time teachers with at least five years of teaching experience. The five-year threshold was chosen because it reflects professional stability and familiarity with leadership practices, ensuring that the data obtained represents an informed perspective. Ten participants participated, which is considered adequate for qualitative research that prioritises data depth over breadth.

Data collection utilised three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews, lasting 15–20 minutes per session, were guided by an open-ended protocol to encourage in-depth responses while maintaining flexibility. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior written consent and supported by field notes. Observations focused on interactions between principals and teachers during daily school activities, particularly regarding implementing the performance improvement program. Relevant documents—such as school work plans, supervision reports, and attendance records—were also reviewed to enhance contextual understanding.

Data analysis followed an interactive and cyclical process (Rahmannisa & Santosa, 2022; Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). The steps included data reduction, data presentation, and drawing/verifying conclusions. Data reduction occurred concurrently with data collection through open coding using the Atlas.ti software. Codes were developed inductively, refined through axial coding, and consolidated into broader categories. Analytical memos were written during coding to record the researcher's reflective insights and trace the interpretive process. Relationships between codes, categories, and themes were visually mapped using the network view feature in Atlas.ti, which identifies hierarchical, chronological, and conceptual associations. Interpretation was conducted hermeneutically, placing the findings within the participants' broader social context and experiences.

Validation strategies include triangulation of sources and methods, member checking (inviting participants to review initial interpretations), and maintaining an audit trail of all analytical decisions. Researchers also engage in ongoing critical self-reflection to acknowledge assumptions and mitigate potential biases, thereby strengthening the credibility and confirmability of the findings.

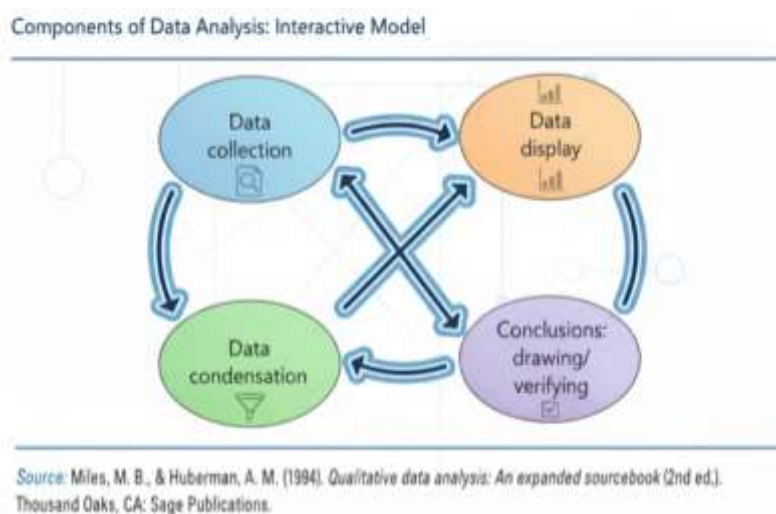


Figure 1. Interactive Data Analysis of Miles and Huberman Model

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

The study results indicate that the principal has played a maximum role in carrying out his function as a manager, where the principal always divides all tasks among the teachers. The principal has also placed teachers according to their fields and expertise, as explained by (HN); "... *Eeemb I see the principal always divides tasks well.. but yes, the teachers here have limited abilities, so what else can I do...*". Meanwhile, (GA) also stated, "... *yes of course, as the principal, of course he has directed us, ... but we also have different abilities*". In organising training, the principal has planned and implemented training to improve teacher competency. In addition to providing punishment and rewards, the principal has punished teachers who violate the rules and rewarded teachers who excel in improving their professionalism. The (GA) resource person added that the principal has supervised academics several times a year. "... *several times I saw him enter the classroom and provide direction and input to teachers*".

Meanwhile, (HN) stated, "*Yaah... I am actually a bit scared if he comes into my class often, but what can I do, that is his job...*". The role of the principal has a significant impact on teacher performance because supervision can serve as a means to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Through supervision, constructive feedback can also be provided. One of the main goals of academic supervision is to provide feedback to teachers regarding strengths and areas for improvement in their teaching. The principal and vice principal for curriculum can provide specific, data-based, and constructive feedback that helps teachers improve teaching methods, classroom management, and more effective learning approaches.

According to a (GA) source, this feedback allows teachers to develop and improve their performance continuously. Supervision can also increase teacher engagement and motivation, as supervision conducted with a supportive approach and providing space for teachers to express themselves will increase teacher engagement and motivation. Although on the other hand, this may be somewhat disruptive to the learning process, teachers still feel appreciated when the principal or vice principal for curriculum pays sufficient attention to their learning process. He said, "*Honestly, I really appreciate his attention... but I noticed that some teachers are a bit uncomfortable when he comes into the class... well, what should I say... the learning process may be a bit disrupted, but I think it is still important to do... this can help teachers to give their best in teaching*". Supervision ensures alignment between learning policies and practices. Supervision can ensure that the implementation of the curriculum and education policies in schools follows established standards. According to a (JO) source: "*By conducting regular monitoring and evaluation, the results of supervision can ensure that all teachers work uniformly and in accordance with the agreed educational goals...*".

On the other hand, (ST) stated, "*In my opinion, supervision can be used to overcome problems faced by teachers...*". The principal or deputy head of curriculum can identify teachers' problems or challenges, such as classroom management problems, limited resources, or difficulties in implementing specific methods...". With this understanding, the principal or curriculum representative can provide appropriate solutions. Overall, implementing good academic supervision, which is carried out with a supportive and collaborative approach, significantly influences teacher performance. It creates opportunities for teachers to develop professionally, improve the quality of teaching, and ultimately improve the quality of education in schools.

As conveyed by the speakers (BA and JO), so far, the principal has played a maximum role in directing teachers and the school community; however, there is still resistance from some senior teachers who find it somewhat difficult to accept change. According to them, "*It is hard for us, being far away in a remote area... sometimes it is stressful too, the road here is awful... but the principal's demands are very high...*". Nevertheless, consistent efforts continue to be made, implementing a culture of discipline, cleanliness, and character, so that students and the entire school community are starting to feel positive support. Of course, although these efforts have not been fully realised, a safe and inspiring learning environment has been created. With strong leadership, the school is starting to

achieve its educational goals from an academic aspect and student character formation. (BA) added that, "... *I think our current principal is quite enthusiastic, even though the challenges are quite heavy in my opinion... ha ha ha...*". The coordination between the vice principals for curriculum and student affairs that has been established so far is essential to maintain the consistency of teacher performance because coordination between the two has been proven to keep the learning process according to the established plan. This atmosphere also aligns with the statement of the Vice Principal for Student Affairs (AT), who stated that so far the principal has demonstrated his role in 1) building a relationship of mutual trust, through concrete examples, by creating an open and mutually respectful atmosphere between himself and the teachers. Relationships based on mutual trust facilitate communication and collaboration between school members. The principal always listens to input from teachers, understands the challenges they face, and provides the necessary support (Code: leadership roles). 2) providing clear direction, support, and motivation regarding the goals and expectations of the school. Although initially, this direction was also resisted by many senior teachers. Resource person (JO) stated: "*Teachers here are strange... asked to progress but it is so difficult, even though the principal should at least provide examples with detailed supporting data*".

Therefore, the principal's efforts to supplement it with concrete data support, such as data on resources, training needs, or facilities teachers need to improve performance, are also appreciated by young teachers. His direction includes facilitating collaboration between teaching teams; in this team, teachers are asked to share experiences, exchange ideas, and provide support to improve the quality of teaching. The principal has also organised regular meetings for discussion and collaboration between teachers, providing opportunities for them to learn from each other (Code: motivation). 3) A conducive work environment is critical to support collaboration. As stated by AT, "*I think he is very confident in continuing to approach senior teachers to maintain a good school climate*". It shows that the principal has tried creating a favourable school climate, where teachers feel valued, supported, and unstressed. With a good work atmosphere, teachers feel more comfortable collaborating and improving their teaching quality (Code: learning environment).

According to several teachers (GA, AT, BA, JO, and ST), the principal's function as a motivator has influenced every school community member. With his firmness and charisma, the principal can raise the spirits of all educational and non-educational staff to carry out various activities and tasks that are his responsibility. The principal always builds his personality, is enthusiastic, thinks positively, serves others, is adaptive, and is not rash and reactionary. The results of interviews with the deputy head of curriculum stated that the principal always motivates teachers to improve their professional insight and competence. Motivation is always given to raise teachers' spirits in carrying out their duties with full responsibility, and as an example for teachers and educational staff at the school.

The principal's role has demonstrated his or her commitment to implementing various pre-planned programs. It includes consistently supervising and recording each teacher's performance at the school. He or she facilitates educational staff participation in training and certification. He or she continually monitors the school operator's implementation of school data uploads. He or she provides all educators with advice, direction, and motivation in every meeting. According to (BA and JO), this aligns with the principal's motto, "*progress together, and excel together*." Interviews with the vice principal for curriculum revealed that the principal consistently collaborates with teachers to improve their performance. Some of the steps taken by the principal include building trusting relationships, providing clear direction and facilitation support, collaborating with the teaching team to provide constructive feedback, and creating a positive work environment.

The vice principal for public relations (BA) described the principal's leadership role as his or her ability to build a positive school image in the community, and this ability has significantly impacted teacher performance. The principal's understanding of the school's vision and mission, along with his or her ability to communicate them effectively, also demonstrates that the school has sound systems and organisation, enabling it to achieve its goals effectively. This impact on

teacher motivation and performance is significant, as the principal supports teachers' needs, boosting morale and creating an inspiring teacher image. Teachers feel more valued and motivated to give their best. Using the Atlas.ti program, the interview results as described above, were then coded and grouped into three parts based on the themes depicted in the following concept map:

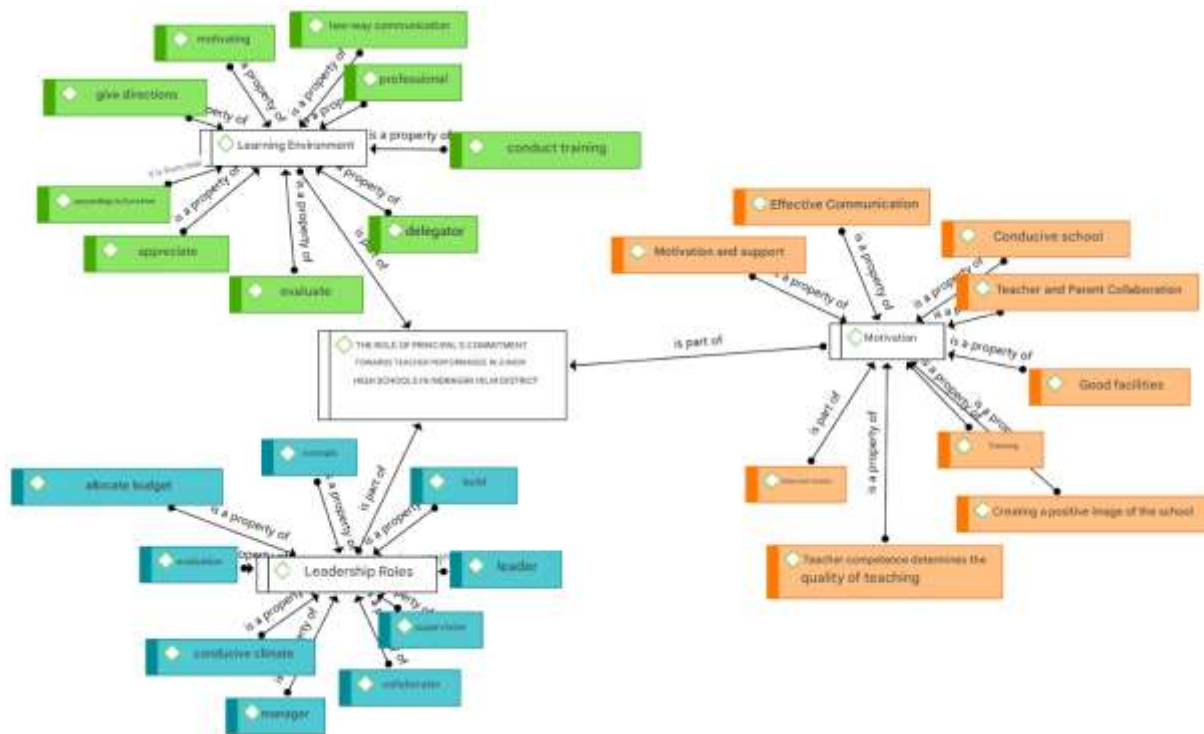


Figure 2. Leadership Strategy Patterns of Junior High School Principals in Indragiri Ilir Plantation Area, Indonesia

## Discussion

The role of the principal as an educational leader is strongly determined by their main competencies, including functioning as a supervisor, controller, coach, director, and role model for teachers and staff (Amelia et al., 2022; Nurlinda, 2020; Rahmannisa & Santosa, 2022). In carrying out supervisory functions, principals are required not only to oversee teaching and administrative activities but also to equip themselves with adequate knowledge of the duties and functions of their staff. This understanding ensures that supervision and coaching can be implemented effectively, without confusion (Estiani & Hasanah, 2022; Setyaningsih & Suchyadi, 2021).

Furthermore, the success of an educational institution is primarily influenced by the principal's leadership strategies. As the central figure in school management, the principal holds a strategic role in improving the quality of education because the realisation of a school's mission and vision depends on the system implemented (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2019; Sukaningtyas et al., 2019). In line with this, Jaliah et al. (2020) and Sukaningtyas et al. (2019) classify the minimum standard of the principal's duties into five main functions: administrator, manager, supervisor, innovator, and motivator. Beyond these standards, effective principals must answer three fundamental questions: why quality education is needed, what should be done to improve school productivity, and how to manage schools effectively to achieve optimal performance (Rahmannisa & Santosa, 2022; Spiro, 2013). The ability to respond to these questions reflects the eligibility of a principal to be considered adequate.

An essential aspect of effective leadership is the principal's ability to empower education personnel through collaboration and active involvement in programs that support school development (Pujilestari et al., 2025; Wijaya et al., 2025). It aligns with findings from Rahmannisa

and Santosa (2022), highlighting the principal's role as a motivator who fosters enthusiasm and encourages teachers and staff to enhance their work performance. For this reason, principals must continuously build positive personalities—being enthusiastic, adaptive, and service-oriented—while avoiding pessimistic and reactionary attitudes that could undermine their motivational capacity (Park & Datnow, 2022; Skaalvik, 2020). A principal with a strong personality and exemplary character will naturally become a role model for the entire school community (Corrigan & Merry, 2022).

In addition, principals must be innovators who encourage the creation of new ideas, establish harmonious relationships with their environment, and develop innovative learning models (Su et al., 2020; Urbanová, 2021). The innovative role of the principal is crucial in stimulating teacher creativity, correcting weaknesses in the education system, and providing direction for continuous improvement. This function involves integrating various school activities and modelling adaptive approaches to future educational challenges (Ariyani et al., 2021; Miroj et al., 2020). Through these efforts, principals can strengthen collaboration with teachers, improve instructional practices, foster a more conducive learning atmosphere, and ensure higher educational goals are achieved.

Principal leadership has long been viewed as a key factor in improving educational quality. Parylo and Zepeda (2014) emphasise that effective principals are managers with a track record of success. Jacobson et al. (2005) emphasise the principal's role in setting direction, developing human resources, and redesigning the organisation to support improved school performance. From a practical perspective, these findings have important implications for educational policy and leadership training programs. Training modules for principals should focus on administrative and managerial aspects and emphasise developing motivational, innovative, and character-based leadership skills. Policymakers must design continuous professional development programs that equip principals with strategies to empower teachers, foster school innovation, and adapt leadership practices to cultural contexts. By integrating these elements, schools can build sustainable leadership models that directly contribute to achieving higher educational quality and long-term institutional effectiveness.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that principals' collaborative, instructional, and teacher empowerment-oriented leadership strategies effectively improve teacher performance in remote areas, enhance learning quality, ensure educational continuity, and strengthen equitable and inclusive access to education. Principals who act as learning leaders, motivators, system liaisons, and local innovators can overcome resource and geographic limitations that often hinder school effectiveness. These findings contribute practically to the design of training and coaching programs for principals in remote areas, particularly in strengthening instructional leadership and fostering collaborative school climates. At the policy level, the results highlight the need for affirmative and differentiated initiatives by the Ministry of Education and local governments, including contextualised training, incentive schemes tailored to regional challenges, and digital-based supervision mechanisms. For teachers, transformative principals facilitate collaborative work cultures and adaptive reflective learning. For principal professional development, sustainable mentoring and communities of practice are crucial for sharing innovative solutions and field-based experiences. Nonetheless, this study is limited by its focus on schools in plantation areas of South Sumatra. It does not measure long-term impacts on student learning outcomes, requiring further longitudinal and multi-context studies to strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

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