

School Principal Leadership in Enhancing Teacher Competence: A Qualitative Case Study in Merauke Secondary Schools

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Abstrak: Mutu pendidikan erat kaitannya dengan kompetensi profesional guru, yang pada gilirannya dipengaruhi oleh efektivitas kepemimpinan sekolah. Meskipun banyak penelitian telah meneliti peran kepala sekolah dalam meningkatkan kinerja guru, penelitian terbatas telah mengeksplorasi dinamika kontekstual praktik kepemimpinan di sekolah menengah di Indonesia, khususnya di daerah yang kurang terwakili seperti Merauke. Penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana kepala sekolah di SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim dan SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke menerapkan strategi kepemimpinan untuk mendorong pengembangan profesional guru, dengan penekanan khusus pada kompetensi pedagogik, profesional, dan teknologi. Desain deskriptif kualitatif diadopsi, yang melibatkan wawancara mendalam, analisis dokumen, dan observasi dengan kepala sekolah, guru, dan staf administrasi. Data dianalisis secara tematis untuk mengidentifikasi pola praktik kepemimpinan, tantangan yang dihadapi, dan strategi untuk mengatasi hambatan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kedua sekolah menerapkan kepemimpinan transformasional, meskipun dengan penekanan yang berbeda. SMP IT mengutamakan kolaborasi inklusif dan pengawasan reflektif, sedangkan SMP Muhammadiyah fokus pada inovasi kurikulum dan integrasi digital. Meskipun terdapat dampak positif, tantangan tetap ada, termasuk terbatasnya waktu untuk pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan, kesiapan guru dalam mengadopsi perangkat digital, dan kendala struktural dalam manajemen sekolah. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa kepemimpinan, ketika adaptif dan didasarkan pada konteks, secara signifikan meningkatkan kompetensi guru dan secara tidak langsung meningkatkan hasil siswa. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada literatur dengan memberikan wawasan komparatif mengenai praktik kepemimpinan di sekolah menengah pertama di Indonesia, yang menawarkan implikasi teoretis dan praktis terhadap kepemimpinan dan kebijakan pendidikan.

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan Transformasional, Kompetensi Guru, Pengembangan Profesi, Pendidikan Menengah, Indonesia

Abstract: The quality of education is closely tied to the professional competencies of teachers, which in turn are influenced by the effectiveness of school leadership. While numerous studies have examined the role of principals in enhancing teacher performance, limited research has explored the contextual dynamics of leadership practices in Indonesian secondary schools, particularly in less-represented regions such as Merauke. This study investigates how principals at SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim and SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke employ leadership strategies to foster teacher professional development, with a particular emphasis on pedagogical, professional, and technological competencies. A qualitative descriptive design was adopted, involving in-depth interviews, document analysis, and observations with school principals, teachers, and administrative staff. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of leadership practices, challenges encountered, and strategies for overcoming barriers. The findings reveal that both schools implement transformational leadership, albeit with different emphases. SMP IT prioritizes inclusive collaboration and reflective supervision, while SMP Muhammadiyah focuses on curriculum innovation and digital integration. Despite positive impacts, challenges persist, including limited time for continuous professional development, teacher readiness in adopting digital tools, and structural constraints within school management. The study concludes that leadership, when adaptive and contextually grounded, significantly enhances teacher competence and indirectly improves student outcomes. This research contributes to the literature by providing comparative insights into leadership practices in Indonesian junior secondary schools, offering both theoretical and practical implications for educational leadership and policy.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Teacher Competence, Professional Development, Secondary Education, Indonesia

Introduction



Teacher competence is widely recognized as a critical determinant of educational quality across global contexts, as highlighted in international assessments by (OECD, 2019). Competent teachers—defined across pedagogical, professional, social, and personal domains—significantly impact learning outcomes and the broader school culture. School principals play a vital role as instructional leaders, visionaries, and facilitators of professional development. In Indonesia, mandates such as the Teacher and Lecturer Law (No. 14/2005)(Maulidia, 2023) and Principal Competence Standards (Tanjung et al., 2021) further reinforce principals' responsibilities in cultivating teacher excellence. Nevertheless, schools in remote regions like Merauke continue to face insufficient academic supervision, limited access to professional development, and delayed integration of digital learning technologies.

International research has primarily examined transformational leadership—characterized by vision, inspiration, and empowerment—as well as democratic or distributed leadership in urban or resource-rich schools (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016). Instructional leadership remains a central focus, with the evolving concept of inclusive or shared instructional leadership gaining prominence (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). However, relatively few empirical studies explore how principals in remote or resource-constrained environments operationalize these theories.

In Indonesia, emerging research illustrates leadership impacts in similar contexts. (Werang & Leba, 2022) found that principal leadership positively predicts teacher morale and organizational commitment in remote elementary schools in Papua. (Roesminingsih & Windasari, 2025) demonstrated how transformational leadership mediated through PLCs, self-efficacy, and motivation influences teaching innovation.

Contextual leadership theory posits that leadership must adapt to situational realities to be effective (Hallinger, 2018).

Therefore, this study aims to fill the empirical gap by exploring leadership in two secondary schools in Merauke—schools embedded in resource-limited and geographically isolated contexts. The discovery of adaptive, participatory strategies provides novel insights into how principals reconcile administrative duties with instructional leadership under constraints.

In the Indonesian context, two secondary schools in Merauke—SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke and SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim—illustrate contrasting realities of leadership and teacher competence. SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke, with an enrollment of 574 students, 33 teachers, and 5 staff members, is recognized for its academic and non-academic achievements. The school provides well-equipped facilities such as comfortable classrooms, a computer laboratory, a library, a mosque, and extracurricular facilities, designed to foster a conducive and enjoyable learning environment. Its successes are strongly tied to the principal's transactional and transformational leadership, which motivates teachers and students alike to pursue continuous improvement. Despite these strengths, initial observations indicated that not all teachers fully utilized the available facilities or integrated digital tools such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) into their teaching practice.

In contrast, SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim, while equipped with adequate facilities and implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, has yet to achieve notable academic milestones. Many teachers continue to rely on conventional teaching methods without leveraging available digital and interactive technologies, limiting their professional growth and innovation. These differences highlight the variation in how school leadership practices shape teacher competence and instructional quality in distinct contexts.

At the national level, teacher professional development in Indonesia has shown gradual improvement. In 2022, the professional competence achievement rate was 50.95%, surpassing the target of 47.84% (Susilowati et al., 2023). In 2023, this increased to 52.69% compared with the target of 48.83% (Solihin et al., 2024). Nonetheless, challenges remain significant. For example, results from the 2020 Uji Kompetensi Guru (UKG) revealed an average score of 51.02 for junior secondary teachers, below the national minimum standard of 55. By late 2024, approximately 11,837 junior secondary teachers still lacked the legally required minimum academic qualification of D4/S1(Kawuryan et al., 2021).

These gaps between teacher qualification requirements and classroom practice underscore the crucial role of principals in shaping professional growth. While educational leadership theory emphasizes principals as change agents and learning leaders (Nasir et al., 2020), policy implementation remains normative and often fails to allow flexible, context-sensitive adaptations

(Abbaspour et al., 2024). Internal barriers include teachers' limited participation in training, resistance to pedagogical innovation, and underutilization of digital technology (Montero-Mesa et al., 2023).

These conditions illustrate a significant gap between leadership theory, education policy, and actual practice in schools. While transformational and transactional leadership have been theorized as effective for enhancing teacher competence, practical application differs widely between schools. This comparative qualitative study therefore seeks to analyze how principals at SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke and SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim implements leadership strategies to strengthen teacher competence in pedagogical, professional, social, and personal domains.

Research Objectives:

To analyze:

- (a) What leadership strategies are employed by principals to enhance teacher competence in remote schools
- (b) What challenges do they encounter, and how are these addressed?
- (c) What implications do these strategies have for leadership theory and educational policy?

Method

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore leadership practices in depth and capture the lived experiences of principals and teachers. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows an in-depth understanding of social phenomena by uncovering meanings, experiences, and interactions in their natural settings (Hirose & Creswell, 2023). A qualitative design was chosen because it allows for rich, detailed descriptions and interpretations of phenomena within their natural contexts.

The study was conducted at SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim and SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke. These schools were purposively selected as research sites due to their shared challenges in teacher professional development, particularly related to curriculum reform and digital learning adoption. Participants included school principals, vice-principals, and teachers from both schools. A descriptive design was adopted to capture existing realities comprehensively without manipulating variables, thereby enabling the researcher to document leadership practices and their impact on teacher professional growth.

Data collection methods included: (1) in-depth interviews with principals and teachers to gain insight into leadership strategies, barriers, and outcomes; (2) participant observation of leadership activities, teacher training, and supervision; and (3) document analysis of school policies, supervision reports, and training programs. Data were analyzed using (Asipi et al., 2022) framework, which involves data reduction (coding and categorization), data display (thematic matrices), and conclusion drawing and verification. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of sources and methods, member checking with participants, and maintaining an audit trail.

The study relied on both primary and secondary data sources.

- **Primary Data:**

Obtained directly from participants through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Participants included school principals, teachers, and management staff. In total, six informants were involved, comprising two principals, three teachers, and one vice-principal.

- **Secondary Data:**

Collected from institutional documents such as school policy guidelines, teacher evaluation reports, and academic supervision records. In addition, relevant academic literature was reviewed to strengthen theoretical grounding and enable comparative analysis.

A summary of participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Participants

Code	Position	Age	Gender	Education
FW	Principal SMP IT	30	Male	Bachelor
AI	Teacher SMP IT	27	Female	Bachelor

NN	Teacher SMP IT	36	Male	Bachelor
SW	Principal Muhammadiyah	48	Male	Master
EK	Teacher Muhammadiyah	31	Male	Bachelor
UH	Teacher Muhammadiyah	35	Female	Bachelor

Three complementary methods were employed:

1. In-depth Interviews

Conducted using a semi-structured format to obtain detailed insights regarding leadership strategies, teacher perceptions, and institutional challenges. This technique allowed flexibility while maintaining focus on key themes (Brinkmann, 2022).

2. Participant Observation

The researcher acted as a passive observer during school activities, including academic supervision sessions, teacher meetings, and training programs. An observation checklist was used to record leadership practices, teacher interactions, and organizational dynamics.

3. Document Analysis

Institutional documents such as teacher evaluation forms, training guidelines, and supervision reports were analyzed to validate interview and observation findings. This method also provided contextual depth regarding the schools' formal policies and practices (Armstrong, 2021).

In line with qualitative traditions, the researcher functioned as the main instrument (human instrument). Supporting instruments included interview guides, observation checklists, and document analysis protocols. These ensured systematic data collection while allowing flexibility to capture emerging insights in the field.

To ensure data validity and trustworthiness, the study applied multiple strategies (Hirose & Creswell, 2023):

- Member Checking: Transcripts and interpretations were returned to participants for verification.
- Triangulation: Applied across sources (principals, teachers, documents), methods (interview, observation, documents), and time (multiple observations over three months).
- Audit Trail: A detailed research.

Data were analyzed inductively following (Monaro et al., 2022) involving three key stages:

1. Data Reduction: Filtering and categorizing interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents into thematic codes (e.g., leadership strategies, teacher responses, implementation challenges).
2. Data Display: Presenting findings in narrative descriptions, tables, and selected quotations from participants to illustrate key themes.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Interpreting patterns and relationships while verifying findings through member checking and triangulation.

This analytical approach ensured that interpretations remained grounded in empirical evidence while allowing theoretical integration.

Results

The study identified three major strategies employed by school principals to enhance teacher competence: (1) instructional supervision, (2) needs-based professional development, and (3) the establishment of collaborative teacher learning communities.

Instructional supervision involved regular classroom observations and feedback sessions. At SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim, the principal faced time constraints but addressed these challenges by delegating supervisory responsibilities to coordinators. Needs-based professional development was implemented through training workshops aligned with immediate challenges, including adaptation to curriculum changes and integration of digital tools in teaching. Collaborative learning

communities were formed in both schools to provide teachers with spaces to share best practices and engage in reflective dialogue.

Despite these efforts, several challenges persisted. Limited time availability, inadequate resources, and teachers' low readiness for curriculum and technology adoption were key obstacles. However, principals employed adaptive strategies such as optimizing schedules, providing continuous technical training, and adopting online supervision tools to address these barriers.

The findings support transformational and democratic leadership theories, emphasizing the significance of participatory and adaptive leadership. Teachers who perceived strong support from their principals demonstrated higher motivation and a greater willingness to engage in professional development. Compared to prior studies in urban contexts (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Do & Mai, 2020), this study highlights the distinctive challenges of remote regions but also illustrates the capacity of school leaders to adapt leadership models to meet local needs.

The findings reveal nuanced differences in how transformational leadership is enacted across the two schools. At SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim, the principal fostered an inclusive and participatory climate, encouraging teacher collaboration and establishing open dialogue as a medium for competence development. This approach aligns with the view of principals as not only administrators but also agents of change who inspire and motivate teachers (Njonge, 2023; Vermeulen et al., 2022). Teachers perceived themselves as co-constructors of the learning environment, strengthening collegial trust and commitment.

In contrast, at SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke, transformational leadership was oriented more toward quality assurance and curricular depth, with a stronger emphasis on integrating digital resources and deep learning pedagogies. Research suggests that such an outcome-focused approach, when embedded within collaborative practices, significantly improves classroom instruction and student achievement (Bellibaş et al., 2020a). This indicates that while both schools employed transformational leadership, the locus of emphasis differed—participation and inclusivity at SMP IT, versus curriculum depth and digital integration at SMP Muhammadiyah.

A critical dimension observed in both schools is the reflective and collaborative nature of academic supervision. Moving away from a compliance-driven model, supervision evolved into a professional dialogue where teachers could share classroom challenges, discuss instructional strategies, and co-design improvement plans with principals. This resonates with the concept of clinical supervision, emphasizing professional relationships and mutual trust (Lestari & Fadli, 2024; Lorensius et al., 2022; Njonge, 2023). Such collaborative supervision heightened teachers' self-awareness of their professional competencies and fostered a culture of lifelong learning (Maulidiansyah et al., 2023).

Both principals also demonstrated a commitment to facilitating technological innovation. At SMP Muhammadiyah, digital learning modules and blended instruction became central features of classroom practice. SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim invested in upgrading infrastructure such as laboratories and classrooms to support technology-enhanced learning. However, a key challenge was teachers' limited time to attend external training due to heavy workloads. To address this, principals initiated internal training programs which proved more flexible and directly responsive to teachers' needs (Saltz & Cohen, 2023).

Table 2 summarizes the leadership strategies, challenges, and outcomes observed across the two schools.

School	Strategy	Main Challenge	Outcome
SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim	Delegated supervision; targeted training	Principal's limited time	Improved teacher classroom performance
SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke	Continuous technical training; adaptive leadership	Teachers' low readiness for curriculum & technology	Increased teacher adaptability and engagement

Despite these adaptive measures, several barriers persisted. At SMP IT, the most pressing issue was the principal's time constraints in providing sustained supervision due to overlapping managerial and instructional duties. This echoes earlier findings where school leaders' workload often undermines consistent coaching and monitoring (Hannan & Russell, 2020). At SMP Muhammadiyah, the barrier lay in teachers' readiness for curricular and technological reform. Many teachers remained reliant on traditional pedagogy and required ongoing technical assistance to fully embrace digital instruction (Chukwubueze & Vinella, 2023; Zubková, 2023).

Another cross-cutting challenge relates to training effectiveness. Teachers reported that many training sessions remained administrative rather than instructional, thus failing to meet their professional development needs. Prior studies affirm that effective training must be contextualized and aligned with field realities (Gutiérrez & López, 2021). This finding underscores the need for continuous, need-based training supported by regular evaluation mechanisms.

In terms of leadership strategies for professional development, the two schools once again diverged in emphasis. SMP IT prioritized internal collaboration, two-way communication, and project-based learning support—reflecting a participatory culture that enhanced teachers' autonomy and self-efficacy (Nurfahila & Yuliana, 2024). SMP Muhammadiyah emphasized curriculum redesign and digital learning innovation, positioning the principal as a change agent bridging school needs with global educational trends (Verma & Gupta, 2024). Both approaches reinforced teachers' motivation and willingness to innovate, albeit through different pathways.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that adaptive and contextualized transformational leadership is central to sustaining teacher professional development. By tailoring leadership to the institutional context—whether through inclusivity and dialogue, or curriculum innovation and digitalization—principals effectively cultivated professional growth. Moreover, their role as learning leaders extended beyond structural management to intellectual and emotional leadership, shaping a collaborative culture that indirectly but significantly impacts student outcomes (Abbaspour et al., 2024; Sholihah, 2024).

This expanded analysis demonstrates that principals at SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim and SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke act as educators, mentors, and innovators, not merely administrative managers. Their strategies reflect both the constraints of remote, resource-limited contexts and the creative adaptations necessary to thrive. Despite differences in implementation, both leadership models converge on a common theme: the centrality of leadership quality in driving teacher competence and educational improvement.

Discussion

This study reveals that both SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim and SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke adopted transformational leadership practices, though with nuanced differences. The findings support earlier research indicating that transformational leadership fosters teacher collaboration, reflective dialogue, and professional growth (Hallinger, 2018; Vermeulen et al., 2022). However, unlike prior studies conducted in urban schools (Bellibaş et al., 2020b), this research demonstrates how principals in semi-remote Indonesian contexts adapt these practices by emphasizing internal training due to limited access to external professional development. This adaptation highlights the contextual flexibility of transformational leadership in addressing local constraints.

Barriers to teacher competence development, such as limited time and readiness for digital transitions, resonate with global evidence (Hannan & Russell, 2020; Zubková, 2023). Nevertheless, this study contributes by illustrating how principals act as mediators, converting structural limitations into opportunities for collaborative learning communities. This role positions principals not merely as administrators but as learning leaders—a concept increasingly emphasized in leadership literature (Abbaspour et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the findings extend the discourse on clinical supervision. While previous studies often conceptualize supervision as hierarchical control (Saltz & Cohen, 2023), this research demonstrates a shift toward reflective, dialogic supervision that empowers teachers to engage in continuous professional learning. This aligns with recent scholarship on lifelong learning in teacher development (Maulidiansyah et al., 2023).

From a policy perspective, the divergence between SMP Muhammadiyah and SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim underscores the importance of adaptive leadership. Whereas the former integrated digital curriculum reforms effectively, the latter struggled with sustaining teacher engagement in innovative

practices despite sufficient infrastructure. This indicates that material resources alone are insufficient without leadership strategies that foster teacher agency and motivation, echoing similar insights from (Liu, 2024)

Taken together, these results reinforce the idea that leadership is not monolithic but contextually embedded. They offer both theoretical contributions—extending transformational leadership theory to the Indonesian secondary school context—and practical implications, particularly for principal training programs that must account for digital integration, time management strategies, and context-sensitive supervision approaches.

Conclusion

This study concludes that school principals' leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing teachers' pedagogical, professional, social, and personal competences. Participatory and adaptive leadership strategies were found to be effective in overcoming barriers such as limited time, resources, and teacher readiness. Practical contributions of the study include offering guidance for principals in remote and resource-constrained schools, while theoretical contributions extend transformational and participatory leadership frameworks to under-researched contexts. Policymakers are encouraged to invest in principal training programs and develop digital supervision platforms that support continuous teacher professional development. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of leadership practices on teacher competence and student learning outcomes.

This study set out to examine the role of school principals in enhancing teacher competencies at SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim and SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke through a qualitative descriptive design. The findings highlight that while both schools adopt transformational leadership styles, their strategies differ in orientation and implementation. SMP IT prioritizes inclusive collaboration and participatory engagement, whereas SMP Muhammadiyah emphasizes curriculum development, digital integration, and outcome-oriented leadership.

Several key conclusions can be drawn:

1. Leadership as a Determinant of Teacher Competence.

Principals' leadership has a significant and multidimensional influence on teacher competencies, particularly in pedagogy, professional growth, and technological adaptation. Both schools illustrate that effective leadership goes beyond administrative tasks; principals act as change agents, facilitators, and mentors who cultivate environments of innovation and lifelong learning.

2. Transformational but Contextualized Leadership.

Although both schools demonstrate transformational leadership, the strategies employed are highly contextual. SMP IT builds its strength through collaboration and internal trust, while SMP Muhammadiyah leverages digital transformation and curriculum deepening. This indicates that transformational leadership is not a one-size-fits-all model but requires adaptation to institutional culture, resources, and teacher readiness.

3. Supervision as Reflective Practice.

The evolution of academic supervision from control-based to reflective and collaborative practice contributes significantly to professional development. Both schools have shown that supervision, when approached as dialogue and coaching, empowers teachers to engage critically with their instructional practices and pursue continuous improvement.

4. Challenges in Teacher Development.

Despite progress, structural and personal barriers remain. SMP IT faces constraints of time and workload, while SMP Muhammadiyah struggles with teacher readiness in digital pedagogy. These challenges highlight the necessity of targeted professional development programs that are practical, context-driven, and sustained over time.

5. Strategic Leadership for Sustainable Education.

Principals must exercise adaptive and context-sensitive leadership that combines pedagogical guidance, technological facilitation, and managerial competence. The findings emphasize the

importance of leadership that is both transformational and pragmatic, aligning with the demands of 21st-century education while accommodating local realities.

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on transformational leadership in education by showing that its impact is mediated through contextual adaptation. It provides empirical evidence that school leadership influences teacher competence indirectly through organizational climate, professional dialogue, and innovation culture.

Practical Implications

For practitioners and policymakers, the study underscores the need to design leadership training programs that not only strengthen managerial skills but also emphasize coaching, supervision, and digital innovation. Schools should develop continuous professional development (CPD) models tailored to teacher needs, integrate supervision with mentoring, and leverage technology for efficiency.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited to two schools in Merauke, which constrains generalizability. Future research should employ a comparative multi-site or mixed-methods design across different regions to test the robustness of these findings. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in tracing how leadership practices evolve over time and their sustained impact on teacher competencies and student outcomes.

Final Remark

Overall, the study reaffirms that school leadership is a pivotal driver of teacher professional development and educational quality. The principals at SMP IT Lukman Al Hakim and SMP Muhammadiyah Merauke demonstrate that leadership which is visionary, adaptive, and collaborative can effectively nurture teacher competence, thereby enhancing the overall quality of learning. This research highlights the need for sustained investment in leadership capacity as a strategic pathway toward achieving equitable and high-quality education in Indonesia and beyond.

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