

Transformational Principal Leadership in Enhancing Teacher Performance at SMP Negeri 1 Tanjung Raja

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the role of school principal leadership in improving teacher performance at SMP Negeri 1 Tanjung Raja. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, with informants selected via *purposive sampling* and validated through method triangulation. The findings reveal that the principal consistently applies a democratic-transformational leadership style through three integrated strategies: open two-way communication, reflection-based post-supervision coaching, and dual motivation that combines public recognition with professional meaning reinforcement. Unlike previous studies that mainly examined principal leadership styles in general, this study proposes an integrated leadership model combining open communication, reflection-based coaching, and dual motivation strategies to improve teacher performance. This combination of strategies significantly enhanced teachers' commitment and instructional innovation. These findings serve as a practical reference for school principals and policymakers in designing teacher quality improvement programs, particularly in the context of implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum).

Keywords: School Principal Leadership, Teacher Performance, Transformational Leadership Style, Academic Supervision, Kurikulum Merdeka, Teacher Motivation.

A. Introduction

Education is a fundamental pillar in building a civilized nation that is both characterful and competitive in the global era. Within the school ecosystem, educational quality is largely determined by two key factors: effective school principal leadership and teacher professionalism as the primary agents of learning. As the highest authority in the school, the principal bears full responsibility for optimizing the entire capacity of the teaching staff. Empirical studies indicate that effective leadership can contribute up to 68.4% to the improvement of teacher work performance (Wijayanto et al., 2021).

Purposeful leadership can foster work commitment, create a conducive organizational climate, and accelerate the achievement of the institution's strategic goals. Previous studies have explored transformational leadership, instructional leadership, and principal

managerial competence as factors influencing teacher performance. However, limited studies have examined how these leadership dimensions are integrated into practical leadership strategies that simultaneously strengthen communication, reflective supervision, and teacher motivation within the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining an integrated principal leadership model for improving teacher performance.

This study is motivated by the persistent competency gap among teachers. Empirical data reveal that mastery of digital technology and the implementation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-based learning approaches remain a challenge for approximately 43% of teachers in Indonesia (Muharram et al., 2024). This situation is further complicated by the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum), which demands a paradigm shift in teaching from a teacher-centered to a student-centered model. National data indicate that only around 54% of schools have been able to adopt the new curriculum optimally, largely due to limited pedagogical readiness among teachers (Kemendikbudristek, 2023).

More specifically, preliminary observation at SMP Negeri 1 Tanjung Raja found that approximately 28% of teachers still fell under the sufficient performance category, 62% predominantly relied on the lecture method, and only 23% were able to develop digital interactive learning media. These conditions call for intensive and targeted principal leadership intervention (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). Accordingly, this article addresses one research question: How does principal leadership improve teacher performance at SMP Negeri 1 Tanjung Raja?

Previous studies have consistently underscored the urgency of this topic. Mulyasa (2015) affirms the principal's position as a crucial element in efforts to improve educational quality, while Barnawi and Arifin (2014) explain the significant contribution of leadership in coordinating school quality development as a whole. Rahmawati and Daryanto (2022) further note that optimal teacher performance is reflected in the ability to adapt to new curricula and to innovate.

Regarding the determinants of performance, Priansa (2014) categorizes them into internal factors—individual competence and external factors, including supervisory mechanisms and organizational climate. In line with educational leadership principles, principals are expected to fulfill seven strategic roles known by the acronym EMASLIM educator, manager, administrator, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator (Daryanto & Farid, 2015). Consistent application of these roles has been reported to improve teacher performance by up to 72% (Werdiningsih et al., 2023).

Research by Kompri (2017) emphasizes that leadership effectiveness is reflected in the ability to empower all school members. In this regard, transformational leadership is considered most ideal as it inspires teachers to transcend personal interests in pursuit of a shared vision (Fadhilah et al., 2020). Instructional leadership also plays a vital role in building a conducive work climate (Amtu, 2015; Mestry, 2017). In the digital age, instructional leadership must also strengthen teachers' digital competencies and develop professional practice communities (Solihin et al., 2021).

A study by Munawar and Jalaluddin (2021) concludes that the intensity of principal coaching directly correlates with the improvement of teachers' professional competence. At the regional level in South Sumatra, Fitria et al. (2020) confirm that an adaptive leadership style and a healthy school organizational culture together serve as primary drivers of teacher teaching productivity. Supriadi et al. (2023) add that a combination of democratic and transformational styles positions the principal as an effective motivating agent.

The research gap addressed by this study lies in the tendency of prior research to employ quantitative approaches in measuring linear correlations between variables (Efendi et al., 2023; Fauzi et al., 2022). By contrast, this study fills that gap through a qualitative approach that explores in depth the behavioral manifestations of principal leadership, the dynamics of interpersonal communication, and the psychological processes that unfold in the principal's efforts to improve teacher performance in the real context of a public school.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, chosen for its capacity to capture meaning, interpret participants' experiences, and describe factually the phenomenon of principal leadership under natural field conditions without relying on statistical calculations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Arikunto, 2020). The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Tanjung Raja. The participants consisted of one principal, four vice principals, eight teachers, one school committee member, and six students.

Informants were selected through *purposive sampling*, that is, by choosing individuals who are directly involved in and have in-depth understanding of the research focus (Helaluddin, 2023). Informants were selected purposively because they were directly involved in leadership implementation and teacher performance improvement programs. The informants included the school principal, four vice principals, two subject teachers, a representative of the school committee, and five students (Rohmadiyah & Zamroni, 2024). Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and observation of leadership

behavior, while secondary data were obtained from school documents, the Education Report Card (*Rapor Pendidikan*), and Teacher Performance Assessment archives (Juniar, 2025).

Data analysis was conducted inductively through four interrelated stages: data collection, data reduction, narrative presentation, and conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2022). Member checking was conducted to confirm interview transcripts and preliminary findings with participants. To ensure data credibility, the researcher applied method triangulation by cross-verifying information from interviews, field observations, and written school documents (Bhana, 2024). The study was organized into four phases: initial preparation, instrument design, field data collection (January–February 2026), and research report finalization.

C. Results and Discussion

Based on a comprehensive analysis of narrative data gathered from interviews and field observations, it was found that principal leadership at SMP Negeri 1 Tanjung Raja in driving teacher performance improvement is actualized through a combination of democratic-transformational leadership styles. This leadership style is reflected in the principal's position as a collaborative facilitator while simultaneously providing professional modeling and inspiration to teachers. This is consistent with Northouse (2021), who states that strong leadership integrates a task-oriented approach (*task behavior*) with the building of meaningful emotional relationships (*relationship behavior*).

In detail, principal leadership in promoting teacher performance is manifested through three major sub-dimensions that mutually reinforce each other in a systemic manner:

1. **Open and Inclusive Two-Way Communication:** The principal builds humanistic and multidirectional interpersonal communication. Through regularly organized informal discussions, the principal creates a safe space for teachers to voice various challenges encountered in the teaching process. This inclusive communication pattern successfully dismantles rigid bureaucratic barriers, thereby fostering psychological safety and a sense of being valued among teachers. The effectiveness of the communication established becomes the primary foundation for building mutual trust, which in turn drives improvements in teaching productivity. These findings indicate that psychological safety created through open communication encourages teachers to express instructional challenges without fear of evaluation. Such an environment strengthens collaborative learning among teachers and supports continuous school improvement.

2. Reflection-Based Coaching (Constructive Supervision): In carrying out professional development, the principal transformed the supervision paradigm from an inspection-oriented model focused on identifying mistakes into an instrument for teacher career development. The coaching process was conducted through formal channels in the form of scheduled clinical academic supervision as well as informal channels through spontaneous classroom visits. Reflection-based coaching transforms supervision from a compliance-oriented process into professional learning. Consequently, teachers become active agents of instructional improvement rather than passive recipients of evaluation. The main characteristic of this coaching process lies in the reflective post-supervision discussions, where the principal does not directly judge teachers' shortcomings, but instead poses open-ended questions that encourage teachers to reflect on the learning process they have implemented. These findings are in line with the study of Istiqomah et al. (2025), which emphasized that reflection-based academic supervision is effective in improving teacher professionalism and encouraging more innovative teaching practices.
3. Synergistic Dual Motivation Strategy: The principal simultaneously activates both intrinsic and extrinsic teacher motivation. Extrinsic motivation is provided in the form of tangible recognition, supportive work facilities, and public appreciation at staff meetings for teachers whose students have achieved distinction. Meanwhile, intrinsic motivation is strengthened through the presentation of best teaching practices, reinforcement of teachers' awareness of the noble meaning of their profession, and encouragement to actively share experiences through the digital GTK platform. The integration of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation demonstrates that sustainable teacher performance requires not only external rewards but also internal professional commitment and self-efficacy. This dual motivation model has been shown to produce stronger, deeper, and more sustained teaching commitment.

The integration of these three dimensions communication, coaching, and motivation simultaneously addresses the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of teachers. This discussion aligns with the concept of the Professional Learning Community developed by Kools and Stoll (2021), which defines an effective school as an institution characterized by a continuous collective learning mechanism driven by visionary principal leadership. Furthermore, the findings of this study are consistent with previous research showing that transformational leadership demonstrated by school principals has a positive influence on improving teachers' professionalism and performance in planning, implementing, and evaluating student-centered learning (Supandi, 2022).

D. Conclusion

This study successfully addresses its objective of analyzing in depth the role of principal leadership in fostering teacher performance improvement. The findings demonstrate that the principal at SMP Negeri 1 Tanjung Raja executes leadership through consistent and measurable application of a democratic-transformational style. The findings provide practical implications for school principals by demonstrating that integrating communication, coaching, and motivational strategies can strengthen teacher professionalism and support the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Teacher performance improvement is not achieved through top-down bureaucratic authority, but rather through the integration of three complementary leadership instruments: open two-way communication to build trust, clinical supervision oriented toward reflective coaching, and dual motivation stimulation encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. This unified leadership model has proven effective in reshaping teachers' perceptions of supervision into a more positive experience, increasing their openness to pedagogical innovation, and strengthening professional commitment in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* optimally.

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