

Principal's Leadership Management in Improving the Professional Competence of High School Teachers

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Abstract. This study examines the implementation of principals' leadership management in improving the professional competence of teachers in high school. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and comparative study design, the research was conducted at SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti and SMAN 1 Cisayong which were purposively selected based on the similarity of accreditation status A but differences in leadership characteristics. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 6 key informants, participatory observation, and documentation studies, then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings of the study revealed that the effectiveness of the principal's leadership was determined by the ability to integrate management functions (planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating) with the specific context of each school. SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti implements an instructional-democratic leadership style with a focus on strengthening educational technology through a "mentor-mentee" model, while SMAN 1 Cisayong develops a transformational-participatory style with an emphasis on methodological innovation through "learning communities". Both approaches have proven to be equally effective when aligned with the characteristics of the organization and the needs of teachers. This study concludes that the success of improving teachers' professional competence does not depend on the superiority of one particular leadership style, but on the suitability between leadership characteristics and the institutional context. These findings reinforce the contingency approach in educational leadership theory and recommend the development of a context-based leadership training model that emphasizes adaptive, reflective, and collaborative abilities for school principals in the face of the demands of educational transformation in the Independent Curriculum era.

Keywords: leadership management, teacher professional competence, instructional leadership, transformational leadership, comparative studies

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The quality of learning in a school is highly dependent on the effectiveness of the principal's management in carrying out the dual role of leader and manager. As instructional leaders, school principals are responsible for improving the quality of education through a series of managerial strategies that include planning, organizing, directing, and controlling [1], [2]. Effective leadership not only creates a conducive learning environment and has a positive impact on student learning outcomes [3], but also positions the principal as the main coach in charge of developing teacher competencies as a key element in the educational process [4]. Thus, efficient management directly contributes to the quality of teaching, team development, and strengthening collaboration between educators [5], [6].

However, these quality improvement efforts face a fundamental obstacle, namely the lack of optimal professional competence of teachers at the high school level. This problem can be identified from three crucial factors. First, the dominance of the lecture method in learning indicates a lack of pedagogical innovation [7], [8]. Second, the low use of technology and digital learning media, such as Google Classroom, limits the student learning experience that is in accordance with the demands of the times [9], [10]. Third, low participation in professional development forums such as MGMP and seminars hinders the process of updating teaching knowledge and skills [11]. This condition shows that there is a gap between the demands of modern education and the capacity of teachers, so it requires strategic intervention.

It is in this context that the transformative leadership of the principal becomes a decisive solution. Its implementation strategy can be realized through: (1) continuous academic supervision to provide constructive feedback and improve teaching practices [1]; (2) systematic coaching and mentoring that supports the adoption of innovative methods and modern technology [5]; and (3) creating a positive work climate and providing motivation to build collaboration and the spirit of innovation [12]. These strategies position school principals as a catalyst for transformation that is able to drive holistic improvement in the quality of education.

Although theoretically the strategy has been proven, its implementation in the field shows significant variations in effectiveness. This variation is influenced by differences in leadership styles, ranging from an active approach that focuses on coaching to an administrative approach that is more limited to management [13]. In addition, school principals face classic obstacles in the form of budget constraints, low teacher motivation, and lack of stakeholder support [14], [15]. Therefore, an integrative strategy is needed that combines systematic coaching with a flexible approach to address the complexity of these challenges, while creating a collaborative learning environment and supporting the improvement of the quality of continuing education [16], [17].

1.2 Previous Research and Rationale

Theoretically, this study is grounded in Terry's (2015) management theory, which emphasizes the four essential functions of management planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling as the foundation for effective educational administration [18]. This theoretical framework aligns with contemporary perspectives that link managerial competence with instructional leadership effectiveness. Empirically, the relationship between principals' leadership and teachers' professional competence has been widely explored. Widiyan, Sirisooksilp, and Narot (2020) developed and validated an instructional leadership scale tailored to the Indonesian educational context, demonstrating that strong instructional leadership significantly enhances teacher engagement and classroom effectiveness [19]. Similarly, Mala, Roesminingsih, and Riyanto (2021) found that instructional leadership plays a pivotal role in improving teachers' pedagogical quality and students' learning outcomes [20]. Building upon transformational leadership theories, Haestetika, Suryana, and Haryanti (2023) revealed that transformational leadership styles positively influence teachers' innovation and willingness to adopt new teaching practices [21]. Supporting this, Hasibuan and Yusuf (2025) highlighted that transformational leadership fosters a collaborative school culture and strengthens teacher professionalism through participatory management practices [22].

Although various studies have proven a positive relationship between principal leadership and teacher competence, findings in the field point to variations and inconsistencies in practice. The main gap identified was that the effectiveness of leadership strategies was strongly influenced by the school context and the unique characteristics of the leader, which had not been explored in depth in previous studies. In addition, there is still limited research that specifically compares the implementation of leadership in two schools of equal quality but led by figures with different characters.

To fill this gap, this study offers novelty through a contextual comparative design approach by comparing SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti and SMAN 1 Cisayong which have the same status (grade A) and number of teachers, but are led by principals with different characters. This approach allows for a sharper analysis to isolate the influence of variations in leadership styles in equivalent contexts. In addition, this research is committed to exploring specific and factual leadership strategies and identifying unique supporting and inhibiting factors in each location, so as to produce contextual and applicable understanding and recommendations.

2 Method

2.1 Research Approaches and Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive type of research. This approach was chosen to understand the phenomenon in depth in its natural context, especially in exploring the dynamics of educational leadership, managerial interaction, and teacher competency development strategies in the school environment [23]. This type of descriptive research is used to describe in a complete and systematic manner the

principal's leadership strategy, the obstacles faced, and the solutions taken in improving teachers' professional competence [24].

The research was carried out in two public high schools that were purposively selected based on suitability with the focus of the study. The selection of this location takes into account the existence of unique and relevant phenomena, in the form of differences in the leadership style of school principals and teacher professionalism development programs structured in each school.

2.2 Research Subject

The determination of the research subject was carried out by purposive sampling technique, which is the deliberate selection of informants based on relevance and direct involvement in the management process of improving teacher competence. The criteria for selecting informants include: (1) having a strategic role in decision-making related to teacher development, (2) being directly involved in the implementation of teacher competency improvement programs, and (3) having at least 5 years of experience in their field.

Table 3.1 Research Subjects

No	Initials	Gender	Age	Position
1	DK	Man	59 years old	Principal
2	JS	Man	58 years old	Principal
3	AS	Woman	58 years old	Vice Principal for Curriculum
4	CR	Man	48 years old	Vice Principal for Curriculum
5	LH	Woman	45 years old	Teacher
6	IS	Woman	45 years old	Teacher

2.3 Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Data collection was carried out through triangulation techniques that included in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies [25]. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to dig up information about principals' leadership practices and teacher competency improvement strategies. Participatory observation is used to obtain a factual picture of the principal's leadership behavior and practice in a real world context, where the researcher is involved in school activities such as academic supervision, work meetings, and teacher training activities. The documentation study is used to complete and verify data through the analysis of documents such as School Work Plans, academic supervision reports, and the results of the Teacher Performance Assessment. In its implementation, the researcher acts as the main instrument supported by a set of auxiliary instruments in the form of semi-structured interview guidelines, systematic observation sheets, and documentation checklists developed based on the research focus.

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out following the Miles and Huberman interactive model through a continuous process [26]. The initial stage is data reduction where raw data from the field is filtered, centered, and simplified to focus on information relevant to the focus of the research. Furthermore, the reduced data is presented in the form of descriptive narratives and matrices that allow researchers to understand the patterns and relationships between the data. The final stage is the drawing of conclusions through the process of verification and interpretation of the findings to formulate meanings and conclusions that answer the focus of the research. This analysis process is carried out iteratively during the study until comprehensive and meaningful findings are obtained.

3 Results

This study examines the leadership management of school principals in improving the professional competence of teachers at SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti and SMAN 1 Cisayong. The findings of the study reveal that the management process takes place through systematic stages, starting from planning, organizing, implementing, evaluating, and identifying obstacles and solutions.

3.1 Characteristics of Leadership Style

Table 4.1 Comparison of Principals' Leadership Styles

Aspects	SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti (DK)	SMAN 1 Cisayong (JS)
Leadership Style	Instructional & Democratic	Transformational & Participatory
Development Focus	Educational Technology & Learning Media Innovation	Classroom Action Learning Methodology & Research
Supervision Approach	Scheduled & Instrument-Based	Spontaneous & Need-Based
Motivation Strategy	Reward System & Public Recognition	Empowerment & Delegation of Responsibility
Communication	Formal through Structured Meetings	Informal through Collegial Approach
Decision Making	Bottom-up through Deliberation	Collaborative with Core Teams

Based on in-depth interviews with teachers, various perceptions about the competency improvement program carried out were revealed:

From SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti: LH teacher (45 years old) stated: “The ICT training program initiated by Mr. DK really helped me in creating interactive learning media. At first, I struggled, but with regular mentoring from senior teachers, I can now make my own learning videos.” The Math teacher added: “The reward system implemented

keeps us motivated to keep innovating. The awards in the form of certificates and incentives, although not big, mean a lot to us.”

From SMAN 1 Cisayong: IS teacher (45 years old) revealed: “Mr. JS encourages us to be independent in developing learning methods. The lesson study program allows us to learn from our fellow teachers and improve teaching techniques on an ongoing basis.” The Senior Indonesian teacher explained: “Mr. JS's collegial approach made us not hesitate to consult. He often comes directly to class and provides constructive feedback after learning observations.”

3.2 Needs-Based Strategic Planning

In the planning stage, the two schools showed seriousness in developing a teacher competency improvement program, albeit with different approaches. The principal of SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti (DK) emphasized more on strengthening educational technology capabilities through the “Digital Classroom Initiative” program, while the principal of SMAN 1 Cisayong (JS) focused on developing innovative learning methods through the “Research Teacher Program”.

Table 4.2 Implementation of Competency Enhancement Programs

No	Management Aspects	SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti	SMAN 1 Cisayong
1	Planning	Focus on educational technology	Focus of learning methodology
2	Organizing	A structured mentor-mentee model	Flexible learning community
3	Implementation	Technology & simulation workshop	Lesson study & action research
4	Evaluation	Digital product-based assessment	PTK-based assessment
5	Achievements	90% of teachers use digital platforms	80% of teachers implement PTK

The implementation stage shows significant differences in approach. At SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti, ICT training has succeeded in improving the ability of 90% of teachers to use digital platforms for learning. One young teacher admits: “After attending the workshop, I am now confident in using various learning apps that make the classroom more engaging.”

Meanwhile, at SMAN 1 Cisayong, the lesson study program succeeded in creating a positive culture of collaboration. As one teacher put it: “Through joint observation and post-learning discussions, we improve the quality of teaching without feeling judged.”

3.3 Continuous Evaluation and Program Adaptation

The evaluation mechanism in the two schools also reflects differences in leadership styles. SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti uses a digital product-based assessment with a standardized rubric, while SMAN 1 Cisayong emphasizes more on portfolio-based assessments and learning reflections.

3.4 Innovation in Overcoming Obstacles

In the face of obstacles, the two principals showed different but effective strategies. A teacher from SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti appreciated: “Despite the limited budget, Mr. DK managed to collaborate with a technology company to provide us with free training.” Meanwhile, a teacher from SMAN 1 Cisayong assessed: “Mr. JS is able to make optimal use of internal resources. Senior teachers are entrusted to mentor the juniors, so they don't always rely on external training.”

These findings show that despite having different leadership styles, the two principals managed to develop an effective management system to improve teachers' professional competence, with positive support and appreciation from teachers.

4 Discussion

This discussion interprets the findings of the research within the theoretical and empirical context of educational management and leadership. It constructs a conceptual understanding of the relationship between principals' leadership styles, the implementation of management functions, and the improvement of teachers' professional competence in public high schools. Using a reflective and critical approach, this section emphasizes that the success of educational leadership results from a complex interplay among institutional contexts, leadership vision, organizational culture, and adaptive capacity in translating theory into effective practice. Leadership in education is not merely a set of administrative routines but an intellectual, moral, and social act that transforms school culture into a collaborative learning community.

4.1 Contextualization of Management and Leadership Theory

The results reaffirm the principles of management theory articulated by Terry (2015), who identifies planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling as the foundational functions of effective management. However, this study demonstrates that the implementation of these functions is deeply contextual and cannot be generalized across educational institutions. At SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti, for instance, management efforts were directed toward strengthening digital literacy, optimizing classroom technology, and integrating online-based supervision as part of post-pandemic adaptation. Meanwhile, at SMAN 1 Cisayong, the focus lay in promoting teacher

research competence and developing methodological innovation through collaborative classroom action research.

These variations reflect that management effectiveness is contingent upon local culture, institutional capacity, and leadership orientation. A principal's managerial skill does not operate in isolation but interacts with socio-economic realities, resource availability, and stakeholder dynamics. Schools located in rural or resource-limited contexts tend to rely more on collective problem-solving, social capital, and community participation to sustain quality improvement. This finding aligns with contingency theory, which states that there is no single best leadership style. Leadership effectiveness depends on the fit between the leader's approach and contextual demands.

The comparative design of this research sharpens the epistemic lens for understanding leadership as a relational and situational practice. The instructional democratic leadership style at SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti emphasizes participatory decision-making and direct pedagogical involvement, whereas the transformational participatory approach at SMAN 1 Cisayong prioritizes empowerment, inspiration, and professional autonomy. Both styles produce positive results, suggesting that leadership success depends less on style categorization and more on the degree of contextual adaptation and cultural resonance.

4.2 Empirical Confirmation and Leadership Adaptation

Empirically, this study confirms the relevance of previous findings by Widiyan, Sirisooksilp, and Narot (2020), who demonstrated that instructional leadership enhances teacher engagement and classroom effectiveness, and by Mala, Roesminingsih, and Riyanto (2021), who found that it improves pedagogical quality and learning outcomes. The evidence from both schools reinforces the view that instructional leadership achieves optimal results when it combines administrative clarity with relational trust. Teachers' motivation increases when principals act not only as supervisors but also as mentors who model good teaching practices.

Similarly, the findings of Haestetika et al. (2023) and Hasibuan and Yusuf (2025) emphasize that transformational leadership contributes to fostering innovation, collegiality, and professional pride among teachers. The principal at SMAN 1 Cisayong demonstrated this by cultivating a sense of shared mission and encouraging teachers to design innovative learning modules aligned with the Independent Curriculum framework. Meanwhile, the principal of SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti applied instructional leadership through daily coaching sessions, lesson study discussions, and joint reflection forums that strengthened both teacher competence and collective accountability.

The post-pandemic educational transition provided a unique context that tested the adaptability of both leadership styles. School leaders were required to balance administrative demands with emotional and technological challenges. Both principals demonstrated adaptive leadership by redesigning management routines to fit hybrid learning settings and by mobilizing teachers to sustain learning continuity. At SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti, this adaptation included reallocating School Operational Assistance (BOS) funds to strengthen ICT infrastructure. At SMAN 1 Cisayong, collaboration with

the school committee and local stakeholders was strengthened to support teacher workshops and online learning innovations.

These empirical insights show that leadership effectiveness in the current era is inseparable from adaptability, creativity, and the capacity to lead through uncertainty. The pandemic not only reshaped how schools operate but also redefined what it means to be an effective leader, one who can manage resources flexibly, empower teachers, and sustain morale during crisis.

4.3 Teacher Agency and Professional Learning Strategies

The novelty of this research lies in revealing factual leadership strategies that directly contribute to improving teacher professionalism. The mentor and mentee model developed at SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti and the learning community approach practiced at SMAN 1 Cisayong represent concrete applications of collaborative professional development theory (Rachmawati et al., 2020). Both strategies emphasize peer mentoring, reflective dialogue, and collective inquiry. The principal's role evolves from a policy enforcer to a learning facilitator who builds a culture of trust and continuous improvement.

Beyond structural design, these strategies signify a deeper transformation in professional learning that positions teachers as active agents rather than passive recipients. The evidence indicates that when teachers are involved in co-planning, co-observing, and co-reflecting, they develop a stronger sense of ownership over their professional growth. At both schools, teachers became more confident in experimenting with new pedagogical methods, sharing best practices, and integrating technology into their lessons. This emerging teacher agency contributes to the sustainability of professional development because motivation is driven by intrinsic commitment rather than external compliance.

Leadership that supports teacher agency also strengthens the school's adaptive capacity. When teachers perceive themselves as partners in leadership, innovation becomes a collective endeavor. This is evident in how both schools developed internal learning networks such as discussion forums, peer observation systems, and innovation showcases. These practices not only enhance professional competence but also foster a sense of belonging and shared achievement. They illustrate that leadership is not a solitary act of authority but a distributed process that grows through dialogue and collaboration.

4.4 Theoretical and Conceptual Implications

Theoretically, this research reinforces Terry's (2015) management theory while integrating it with contemporary perspectives on instructional and transformational leadership. The findings reveal that effective leadership in 21st-century education must balance managerial structure and humanistic flexibility. Instructional leadership ensures pedagogical quality through planning, supervision, and curriculum alignment, while transformational leadership infuses energy, vision, and emotional engagement into the organizational culture.

From this synthesis, an Integrated Instructional and Transformational Leadership Model can be conceptualized. It consists of three interrelated dimensions. The first is strategic planning and mentoring, emphasizing the principal's dual role as a manager and mentor who aligns institutional goals with teacher development. The second is collaboration and empowerment, reflecting participatory management and shared decision-making that enhance collective ownership. The third is reflection and innovation, promoting adaptive learning and continuous improvement within the school. This model supports the idea that leadership effectiveness depends on the balance between structure and agency, control and creativity, tradition and transformation.

This integrative framework also contributes to the discourse on educational reform under Indonesia's Independent Curriculum policy. It aligns with the policy's emphasis on flexible, student-centered, and competence-based learning environments. Principals are expected to orchestrate collaboration, nurture teacher autonomy, and sustain a reflective professional culture. Leadership thus becomes the central mechanism through which curricular ideals are translated into daily instructional realities.

4.5 Practical Implications and Reflective Synthesis

Practically, this study highlights the need for principal training programs that emphasize contextual awareness, adaptive problem-solving, and collaborative leadership. Professional development for school leaders should focus on diagnostic skills, the ability to read school culture, map teacher potential, and identify leverage points for change. The mentor and mentee and learning community models identified in this research can be formalized as best practices in regional education management.

Furthermore, the synergy between principals, supervisors, and school committees should be institutionalized to ensure the sustainability of teacher development programs. Education authorities can facilitate communities of practice among principals to share innovations, reflect on leadership challenges, and design solutions collaboratively. Inter-school collaboration of this kind would strengthen collective intelligence and mutual learning within the education system.

Within the framework of the Independent Curriculum, principals must act not only as instructional leaders but also as catalysts for innovation and guardians of professional autonomy. The findings of this study affirm that participatory and transformational approaches are more adaptive to the dynamic demands of curriculum reform. They allow teachers to experiment, adapt, and collaborate in ways that align with national goals for holistic and character-based education.

In synthesis, this research enriches the literature on educational leadership by showing that leadership effectiveness emerges from the integration of theory and practice as well as from the compatibility between leadership style and institutional context. The comparative perspective demonstrates that different leadership configurations can yield equally positive outcomes when grounded in adaptive, reflective, and collaborative practice. Future research is encouraged to explore the longitudinal effects of these leadership approaches on teacher retention, innovation

sustainability, and student achievement to deepen understanding of how leadership transforms educational quality over time..

5 Conclusion

This study confirms that the effectiveness of educational leadership depends on the principal's ability to integrate management principles with the school's context and the dynamics of human resources. The application of management functions as defined by Terry (2015) remains relevant but requires contextual adaptation to align with institutional characteristics. Principals who balance administrative and instructional roles demonstrate transformative leadership that drives sustainable improvements in learning quality. Both instructional-democratic and transformational-participatory leadership styles are effective when aligned with the school's organizational culture and socio-environmental conditions. The comparison between SMAN 1 Cihaurbeuti and SMAN 1 Cisayong reveals that leadership success is determined not by the abundance of resources but by the capacity to cultivate a collaborative and reflective ecosystem. Principals as learning leaders foster professional culture through "mentor-mentee" mechanisms and "learning communities," strengthening teacher capacity and shifting management paradigms from control toward empowerment. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the contingency approach in educational leadership, emphasizing the importance of coherence between leadership style, organizational structure, and socio-cultural context. This insight is particularly relevant in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum, which demands flexibility and innovation. Practically, the study recommends developing context-based leadership models that integrate managerial literacy, social sensitivity, and reflective capacity. Collaboration among principals, teachers, school committees, and supervisors must be strengthened to sustain teacher competence development and improve educational quality. Effective educational leadership does not rely on structural authority but on reflective capacity the ability to read context, optimize resources, and inspire continuous transformation toward holistic and sustainable educational quality

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