

The Catalytic Role of Transformational Principal Leadership in Enhancing Islamic Religious Education Teacher Performance via Professional Competence: A Dual-Site Case Study in West Java

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Abstract. In the landscape of modern education, the performance of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers is pivotal not only for academic transmission but for the moral fortification of students against the volatility of globalization. This study investigates the strategic influence of school principal leadership on PAI teacher performance, mediated by the enhancement of professional competence. Employing a qualitative case study design at SMPN 1 Pacet and SMPN 2 Cipanas, West Java, data were harvested through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and extensive documentation analysis. The findings reveal a tripartite mechanism: (1) The Principal as a Transformational Architect, where leadership transcends administrative management to foster an intellectual and spiritual work climate; (2) The Trajectory of Competence Development, where principals actively facilitate continuous professional development (CPD) through supervision and digital integration; and (3) The Synergistic Manifestation of Performance, where enhanced competence translates into innovative, student-centered pedagogy. The study concludes that the principal's role is not merely supervisory but catalytic; effective leadership acts as the scaffold that converts potential teacher competence into kinetic educational performance. These findings advocate for a paradigm shift in principalship training towards instructional and transformational leadership models to sustain the quality of religious education.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Professional Competence, Teacher Performance.

1 Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape in Indonesia serves as a critical frontier where traditional values intersect with the rapid currents of globalization and digital disruption. Within this dynamic ecosystem, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers occupy a unique and burdensome niche. They are tasked not merely with the transfer of theological knowledge (*transfer of knowledge*) but with the far more arduous task of character engineering (*transfer of values*). As articulated the crisis in Islamic education today is fundamentally epistemological and pedagogical; it requires educators who can reconstruct *Adab* (civilized behavior) while navigating the complexities of the 21st century. However, a persistent gap remains between these high expectations and the reality

on the ground [1]. PAI teachers are frequently criticized for pedagogical stagnation, a reliance on rote learning, and a hesitation to integrate digital technologies, which diminishes their effectiveness in engaging the Gen Z cohort [2].

This disparity brings to the forefront the issue of Teacher Performance. Performance is not an isolated variable; it is the downstream output of a complex interplay of internal motivations, external support systems, and professional competencies. While much literature has focused on the individual attributes of teachers, recent scholarship has pivoted towards the ecological factors of the school environment, specifically the role of the School Principal. The principal is no longer viewed merely as a bureaucratic manager but as the Chief Learning Officer responsible for the instructional quality of the institution [3], [4].

The theoretical premise of this study rests on the interaction between three critical variables: Leadership, Competence, and Performance. Transformational Leadership Theory suggests that leaders who inspire vision, provide intellectual stimulation, and offer individual consideration can fundamentally alter the trajectory of their subordinates' professional growth [5]. In the context of SMPN 1 Pacet and SMPN 2 Cipanas, two public junior high schools in West Java, the role of the principal becomes even more pronounced due to the specific socio-cultural challenges of the region. These schools operate in environments where community expectations for religious moral standards are high, yet resources for professional development are often constrained compared to metropolitan centers.

However, a critical gap exists in the current body of literature. Previous studies, such as those by Al Haqiqy [6] and Santosa and Dewi [7], have established a direct link between leadership and performance. Yet, they often treat the black box between these two variables—the mechanism of Professional Competence—cursorily. Professional competence, defined as the mastery of subject matter, pedagogical methodology, and ethical standards [8], [9], is the necessary bridge. A principal cannot force performance; they can only cultivate competence, which in turn yields performance. Furthermore, specific research focusing on *PAI teachers* in public schools (SMP Negeri) is scarce compared to studies in Madrasahs or Islamic Boarding Schools (*Pesantren*). Public school principals often have secular backgrounds or manage diverse faculties, adding a layer of complexity to how they guide religious education teachers specifically.

This study aims to dissect this mechanism. It posits that the principal's leadership is the catalyst that activates the latent potential of PAI teachers. By fostering a climate of Kindness-Based Leadership and strategic SWOT-based planning [10], [11], principals can elevate the professional dignity of PAI teachers. The research questions driving this inquiry are: How does the principal's leadership style influence the professional development of PAI teachers? In what ways does enhanced professional competence mediate the relationship between leadership and classroom performance? And finally, what model of leadership is most effective in the specific contexts of SMPN 1 Pacet and SMPN 2 Cipanas?

The significance of this study lies in its potential to offer a nuanced, empirically grounded model of educational leadership. By analyzing the lived experience of leadership and teaching in these two schools, this research aspires to move beyond normative prescriptions and provide actionable insights for educational policymakers. It argues that to improve the quality of Islamic education, one must first improve the quality of the leaders who lead the educators.

2 Method

Research Design This study adopts a qualitative case study design using a multi-site approach. The case study method was selected for its robustness in examining complex social phenomena—educational leadership and teacher performance—within their real-life context (Yin, 2018). The multi-site design (SMPN 1 Pacet and SMPN 2 Cipanas) allows for a comparative analysis of leadership behaviors across slightly different institutional cultures within the same regional cluster.

Participants Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Key informants included two School Principals (as the primary subjects of leadership analysis), ten PAI Teachers (as the recipients of leadership and subjects of performance), and two School Supervisors (*Pengawas*) to provide an external evaluative perspective. The criteria for teacher selection included a minimum of five years of teaching experience to ensure they had sufficient history with the school's leadership dynamics.

Data Collection Data triangulation was rigorously employed:

1. **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted to probe the principals' strategic visions and the teachers' perceptions of support and competence development.
2. **Structured Observation:** The researchers observed staff meetings, classroom teaching sessions, and principal-teacher interactions to witness the leadership style in action (e.g., during supervision or casual mentorship).
3. **Documentation Study:** Analysis of teacher lesson plans (RPP/Modul Ajar), principal's supervision logs (*Buku Supervisi*), and school strategic plans (*RKAS*).

Data Analysis Data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [12], involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Thematic analysis was used to categorize findings into the three major streams presented in the results section. Validity was ensured through member checking and prolonged engagement in the field.

3 Result

3.1. The Principal as a Transformational Architect: Cultivating the Climate of Growth

The first major finding establishes that at both SMPN 1 Pacet and SMPN 2 Cipanas, the principals operate far beyond the traditional scope of administrative managers. They function as Transformational Architects, actively designing a school culture that prioritizes intellectual and spiritual growth. The data reveals that the Performance of the Teacher begins with the Vision of the Leader.

At SMPN 1 Pacet, the principal employs a strategy best described as Intellectual Stimulation combined with Spiritual Anchoring. In interviews, PAI teachers reported that the principal frequently challenges them to move beyond the textbook. One teacher noted, *The principal doesn't just ask if I taught the syllabus; he asks if the students understood the moral implication of the verse. He challenges us to relate Fiqh (jurisprudence) to modern issues like social media ethics.* This aligns with the dimensions of

transformational leadership [3], where the leader encourages subordinates to rethink old problems in new ways. The principal here acts as a provoker of thought, disrupting the complacency that often settles into religious education. By creating a safe space for pedagogical experimentation, the principal removes the fear of failure, which is often the biggest barrier to performance.

Conversely, at SMPN 2 Cipanas, the leadership nuance leans heavily towards Individualized Consideration and Emotional Support. The principal adopts what might categorize as Kindness-Based Leadership. Observational data showed the principal engaging in informal morning walks, visiting the teacher's room not to inspect, but to converse [13]. This builds a psychological safety net. PAI teachers, who often feel marginalized in the broader secular curriculum, expressed a profound sense of validation. One participant remarked, *The Principal knows the names of my children. When I needed to attend a religious training, he didn't just sign the permit; he arranged for a substitute so I wouldn't worry about my class.* This emotional capital translates directly into professional loyalty and motivation. When teachers feel cared for, their intrinsic motivation to perform increases.

Furthermore, both principals demonstrated a keen ability to manage the School Climate. They actively integrated religious values into the school's operational ethos, thereby aligning the PAI teacher's mission with the school's mission. For example, the implementation of Dhuha Together or Friday Charity was not left solely to the PAI teachers to organize; the principals led these initiatives. This symbolic leadership signals to the entire faculty that religious education is a central pillar of the school, not a peripheral subject. This validation boosts the self-efficacy of PAI teachers, making them feel like integral stakeholders rather than just prayer leaders.

The study also found that these principals utilize a rudimentary form of SWOT Analysis [11] in their strategic planning. They identified the Weakness of PAI teachers—specifically in digital literacy—and the Threat of student disengagement. In response, they formulated Opportunities by allocating school budgets (BOS funds) specifically for In-House Training (IHT). This strategic alignment proves that high teacher performance is engineered through foresight and resource allocation, verifying that leadership is the foundational bedrock upon which teacher capacity is built.

3.2. The Trajectory of Competence Development: From Supervision to Professionalization

The second thematic stream elucidates the *mechanism* by which leadership influences performance: the deliberate enhancement of Professional Competence. The study found that leadership influence is not magical; it is operationalized through rigorous, continuous, and supportive developmental processes. The principals in both schools serve as the primary facilitators of this competency trajectory.

Redefining Supervision: From Policing to Clinical Coaching. Historically, supervision in Indonesian schools has been viewed as a punitive administrative audit. However, the findings at SMPN 1 Pacet and SMPN 2 Cipanas show a paradigm shift towards Academic Supervision as Clinical Coaching. The principals do not merely check lesson plans (*RPP*); they sit in classes to observe the *process*. Post-observation meetings are dialogic. For instance, at SMPN 1 Pacet, after observing a lesson on *Zakat*, the principal did not criticize the content but asked, *How can we make this calculation of Zakat more*

real for the students using Excel or an App? This question directly targets the teacher's Professional Competence (specifically, pedagogical content knowledge and digital integration). It forces the teacher to upgrade their skills to answer the question. This aligns with Masruroh's findings that supervision is effective only when it is constructive [14].

The Digital Leap: Facilitating Technological Competence. A critical component of professional competence in the 21st century is digital literacy. Recognizing the gap identified, the principals at both sites took aggressive steps to bridge the digital divide [2]. They did not just demand that PAI teachers use projectors; they facilitated peer-tutoring sessions where younger, tech-savvy teachers mentored senior PAI teachers. At SMPN 2 Cipanas, the principal mandated that all PAI assessments must utilize digital platforms (e.g., Google Form, Quizizz) at least once a semester. This policy was accompanied by workshops. The result was a tangible increase in the Professional Competence of the teachers. They moved from being textbook readers to multimedia designers. One teacher admitted, *Initially, I was forced. But the Principal insisted and provided the Wi-Fi and the training. Now, I can create interactive slides about Islamic History, and the students love it.*

Strengthening Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). The study also highlights how leadership fosters deep subject matter expertise. The principals encouraged PAI teachers to be active in the Subject Teacher Consultative Group (MGMP). Unlike in schools where permission to attend MGMP is grudgingly given, these principals monitored attendance and required teachers to disseminate their MGMP learning to colleagues upon return. This Train the Trainer model ensures that competence is not just acquired but distributed. It creates a learning community within the school. The principals pushed PAI teachers to master not just the *Dalil* (scriptural evidence) but the psychological method of delivering it to adolescents. This push towards Pedagogical Competence ensures that the teachers are not just preachers (*Muballigh*) but professional educators who understand learning theories.

Facilitating Certification and Higher Education. Finally, the principals played a role in the formal aspect of professionalization. They actively encouraged and administratively supported teachers pursuing Professional Teacher Education (PPG) or Master's degrees. By adjusting teaching schedules to accommodate university classes, the principals demonstrated a commitment to long-term competence. This structural support removes the logistical barriers to self-improvement, allowing teachers to focus on upgrading their intellectual horizons. Thus, the trajectory of competence development is clear: it is initiated by the leader's expectation, supported by the leader's resources, and sustained by the leader's consistent supervision.

3.3. The Synergistic Manifestation of Performance: Innovation and Engagement in the Classroom

The final thematic stream describes the outcome: Teacher Performance. The study confirms that the combination of Transformational Leadership and Enhanced Professional Competence culminates in a significantly elevated level of performance in the classroom. Performance here is defined not just by administrative compliance, but by the quality of the learning experience and the engagement of the students.

Pedagogical Innovation and Student Engagement. At both schools, the classroom dynamics of PAI lessons have shifted from passive listening to active engagement.

Teachers, emboldened by their new competencies and supported by their principals, are employing Student-Centered Learning (SCL) approaches. For example, at SMPN 1 Pacet, a teacher was observed using a Problem-Based Learning model to teach the concept of *Qada and Qadar* (Destiny). Instead of a lecture, students were given case studies of natural disasters and asked to discuss the theological implications. This high-level performance requires a teacher who is confident in their subject matter and skilled in classroom management—competencies fostered by the leadership. The students appeared visibly engaged, debating and asking questions, a sharp contrast to the stereotype of a boring religion class [15], [16].

Digital Integration as Standard Practice. The performance of PAI teachers now seamlessly integrates technology. At SMPN 2 Cipanas, teachers use YouTube content to show the geography of the Middle East during *Sirah* lessons, or use augmented reality apps to demonstrate the *Haji* pilgrimage steps. This performance metric—the ability to utilize diverse media—is a direct result of the principal's digital push. It has made PAI one of the favorite subjects among students, as indicated by student feedback collected by the school. The teachers are performing at a level where they speak the digital language of their students, bridging the generational gap.

Holistic Assessment and Character Formation. Performance is also evident in how teachers assess students. Moving beyond multiple-choice tests, PAI teachers in these schools are implementing Authentic Assessment. They evaluate the students' prayer practice (*Amaliyah*), their social behavior, and their digital ethics. This requires a high level of professional effort and attention to detail. The teachers are willing to put in this extra performance effort because they feel accountable to the high standards set by the principal. The moral monitoring of students is active, with teachers collaborating with counseling guidance (*BK*) teachers—a collaboration fostered by the principal's inclusive leadership style.

The Teacher as Role Model (*Uswah Hasanah*). Ultimately, the highest form of performance for a PAI teacher is their own behavior as a role model. The study found that the teachers, influenced by the Transformational Leadership of their principals, have become more disciplined and empathetic. They arrive early, dress impeccably, and speak with kindness. They are mirroring the leadership they receive. As the principal models integrity to the teachers, the teachers model integrity to the students. This Chain of Exemplars is the ultimate indicator of performance in Islamic education. The teachers have internalized the mandate that they are not just teaching Islam, they are representing it.

In summary, the performance observed at SMPN 1 Pacet and SMPN 2 Cipanas is high-quality, adaptive, and impactful. It is the visible fruit of a root system nourished by the principal's leadership and the soil of professional competence. The teachers are performing not out of fear of punishment, but out of professional pride and a sense of religious mission, ignited by their leaders.

4 Discussion

The findings of this study offer empirical validation to the theoretical framework that leadership is the linchpin of educational quality. The study confirms Bass and Riggio's (2006) assertion that transformational leadership impacts followers by elevating

their needs and abilities. In the context of SMPN 1 Pacet and SMPN 2 Cipanas, the principals successfully transitioned from being mere administrators of the status quo to agents of change. By focusing on Intellectual Stimulation, they dismantled the pedagogical stagnation often found in religious education, pushing teachers to adopt inquiry-based and digital learning methods.

Crucially, this research highlights the mediating role of Professional Competence. Leadership does not improve performance by magic; it improves performance by building capacity. The principals' focus on clinical supervision and continuous professional development (CPD) aligns with Mulyasa's [17] view that competence is the currency of performance. Without the specific interventions to improve Digital Literacy and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), the principal's vision would remain rhetorical. This supports the findings of Masruroh (2022) regarding the necessity of systematic training.

Furthermore, the study resonates with the concept of Kindness-Based Leadership [10]. The emotional support provided by the principals created a psychological safety that allowed teachers to take risks (e.g., trying new technology) without fear of reprimand. This is particularly vital in the Indonesian cultural context, where Bapak-ism (paternalistic leadership) can sometimes be stifling. Here, it was channeled into a supportive mentorship.

The integration of digital innovation within PAI classrooms serves as a testament to the adaptability of these teachers when properly led. The study challenges the stereotype that religious teachers are resistant to modernity. On the contrary, when led by a visionary principal who provides the necessary tools and training, PAI teachers can be at the forefront of educational innovation [2], [18].

However, the study also acknowledges challenges. The reliance on the principal's individual character suggests a fragility; if a transformational principal is replaced by a transactional one, the gains in competence and performance might recede. This implies that the System of Leadership needs to be institutionalized, not just personalized.

5 Conclusion

This study concludes that the Principal is the Strategic Lever in the machinery of school improvement. At SMPN 1 Pacet and SMPN 2 Cipanas, the high performance of PAI teachers is a direct downstream effect of Transformational Leadership that prioritizes the cultivation of Professional Competence. The principal acts as a facilitator, mentor, and resource allocator, creating an ecosystem where competence can grow and performance can flourish.

Implications: The Department of Education and Ministry of Religious Affairs should redesign principal training programs to emphasize *Instructional Leadership* and *Human Capital Development* over mere administrative compliance. Principals must be trained to conduct clinical supervision and digital mentorship. Furthermore, PAI teachers must be viewed as professionals requiring continuous technical upgrading, not just theological certification. Future research should expand this model to quantitative methods to test the generalizability of these findings across a wider demographic of Indonesian public schools.

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