THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP IN ENHANCING TEACHER PERFORMANCE AND CAREER INTEREST IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN SUMBER HARTA DISTRICT, SOUTH SUMATRA

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Abstract

School principal leadership plays a critical role in improving the quality of education, particularly in supporting teacher performance and career development. However, challenges such as the aging of teachers nearing retirement, limited technological resources, and administrative burdens often hinder the effective implementation of leadership. This study aims to analyze the influence of school principal leadership on the performance and career interest of elementary school teachers in Sumber Harta District, South Sumatra. A qualitative research method with a case study approach was employed. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving school principals and teachers as informants. The data analysis process included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that principals provide support through supervision, training, informal motivation, and access to information related to teacher certification. A total of 80% of teachers reported that school leadership improved their performance, while 75% expressed similar sentiments regarding career development. Nevertheless, issues related to teacher age and the limitations of technological infrastructure remain significant obstacles.

Keywords: *Transformational leadership; principal leadership; teacher performance; career development*

INTRODUCTION

School principal leadership has long been recognized as a strategic element in supporting the improvement of educational quality. In the current era of digital transformation and educational autonomy, the role of the principal has evolved beyond administrative functions into that of an instructional leader one who is expected to adapt, inspire, and guide all school stakeholders toward achieving high-quality educational goals. Principals are also tasked with creating a conducive school climate, motivating teachers to continually develop their competencies, and fostering innovation in teaching and learning processes. The challenges posed by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the rapid advancement of information technology demand a form of leadership that is adaptive, visionary, and data driven capable of aligning national education policies with the specific needs of local schools.

Nevertheless, in practice, school principal leadership in many regions including Sumber Harta District, South Sumatra—continues to face considerable challenges. Initial observations indicate that academic supervision has not been optimally implemented, some principals struggle to effectively utilize educational technology, and support for teacher career development remains limited. Furthermore, high administrative burdens and the lack of advanced leadership training exacerbate the situation. These problems hinder efforts to achieve the desired quality of education and highlight the urgent need for empirically grounded policy interventions at the school level.

The selection of Sumber Harta as the research site is justified by its unique contextual characteristics. It is a region marked by limited educational infrastructure and technological resources, and its schools are predominantly staffed by senior teachers nearing retirement age. These conditions present distinct challenges for school principals in implementing transformative and collaborative leadership. Rather than being a limitation, these resource constraints underscore the urgency for innovative and flexible leadership models to ensure that teacher professional development continues under any circumstances. Previous research has explored the relationship between principal leadership styles and teacher performance. For example, Sarwar et al. (2022) found that transformational leadership positively impacts teacher performance at the secondary education level. Pawar et al. (2020) highlighted the

principal's role as a facilitator in shaping teachers' professional decisions. Mutholib et al. (2021) specifically investigated the effectiveness of school leadership in improving teacher performance in Muara Wahau. Similarly, Mulder (2024) emphasized the importance of principals as role models in cultivating teacher work ethic. However, most of these studies tend to analyze teacher performance and career development as separate domains (Mulder, 2024; Mutholib et al., 2021; Pawar et al., 2020; Sarwar et al., 2022).

This study aims to fill that gap by integrating two primary focuses teacher performance enhancement and career development as interconnected dimensions. It proposes a novel perspective that frames school principal leadership not only as a driver of educational quality but also as a key factor in sustaining the teaching profession. This integrative approach distinguishes the current study from previous research, which generally isolates managerial and pedagogical aspects.

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive approach to simultaneously examining the relationship between school principal leadership, teacher performance, and career interest in resource-constrained contexts. It also introduces practical leadership strategies based on informal motivation, the establishment of professional learning communities such as KKG (Teacher Working Groups), and the implementation of continuous academic supervision. These findings are expected to enrich the discourse on educational leadership and serve as a foundation for developing policies aimed at strengthening principal capacity in underdeveloped regions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

School principal leadership significantly influences the organizational climate, professional commitment, and career trajectories of teachers (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1998). In elementary schools, transformational leadership has been shown to enhance teacher performance and motivation through shared vision-building, individualized support, and intellectual stimulation (Sarwar et al., 2022).

However, research also highlights challenges in leadership implementation, especially in resource-limited areas. Mutholib et al. (2021) found that administrative burdens and an aging teacher population hinder effective mentoring. Ena and Djami (2021) pointed out that senior teachers often experience career stagnation, although a communicative leadership style can still spark their professional motivation (Ena & Djami, 2021; Mutholib et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to understand how principals function not only as administrators but also as facilitators of learning and career development. This study contributes to the literature by simultaneously examining the roles of leadership in improving both teacher performance and career interest.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Transformational Leadership Theory, developed by Bass & Avolio (1994), comprising four key dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These dimensions help explain how school principals can drive positive change in teacher performance and career aspirations through inspirational and collaborative approaches.

The framework is supported by principles of human resource management in education, emphasizing instructional leadership and continuous professional development as essential for individual and institutional growth ((Ahmal et al., 2020; Pawar et al., 2020).

METHOD
Design and Approach

A qualitative case study design was adopted to explore school principal leadership in its natural context. This approach enables an in-depth examination of leadership strategies, challenges, and impacts in elementary schools with limited resources.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in five public elementary schools in Sumber Harta District, Musi Rawas Regency, South Sumatra, during the 2024 academic year. Participants included 10 teachers and principals selected purposively based on criteria such as a minimum of five years' experience, active school participation, and willingness to be informants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis (e.g., activity records, school reports, photos, and evaluations). Method and source triangulation, along with member checks, were used to ensure data validity.

Data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) model: data reduction, data display (narratives and tables), and conclusion drawing. An audit trail and systematic documentation were maintained for reliability(Miles et al., 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Field Findings (Empirical Evidence)

Based on observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis conducted at five public elementary schools in Sumber Harta District, several empirical findings emerged that reflect the dynamics of school principal leadership in influencing teacher performance and career interest.

1. Teacher Performance

A total of 80% of participating teachers reported improved teaching performance following the implementation of several initiatives by school principals. These included direct classroom supervision, internal training programs, and regular evaluations of the teaching-learning process. Principals also actively provided feedback on learning outcomes, organized teacher discussion forums, and promoted project-based instructional innovations. These practices fostered a consistent and sustainable cycle of quality improvement. Practically, the improvements were evident in more organized lesson planning, better teacher attendance, and increased participation in professional development activities.

2. Teacher Career Interest

Approximately 75% of teachers indicated that school principals played a significant role in supporting their career development. This support was both administrative facilitating access to teacher certification and advanced study programs and psychological, through verbal encouragement, personal appreciation, and developmental coaching focused on individual potential. Teachers were also actively involved in learning communities such as the Kelompok Kerja Guru (KKG) and relevant workshops aimed at enhancing their competencies. As a result, several teachers began planning to pursue postgraduate studies and engaged independently in certified training.

3. Challenges Encountered

Despite the positive developments, several challenges were identified. First, senior teachers nearing retirement tended to resist technology-based training, often expressing low confidence in participating in online sessions or using digital teaching tools. Second, academic supervision was inconsistently implemented due to the heavy administrative burdens on school principals and limited available time. Third, technological infrastructure limitations, including poor internet connectivity and insufficient digital devices, significantly hampered the implementation of digitally driven career development programs.

B. Theoretical Analysis (Based on Scholarly Literature)

The empirical findings align with several theories and previous studies published in reputable international journals.

1. **Transformational Leadership Enhances Collaboration and Performance**
According to Sarwar et al. (2022) and Leithwood & Jantzi (2005), transformational leadership is characterized by a leader's ability to inspire, articulate a shared vision, and foster collective trust and commitment. In the present study, principals who emphasized open communication, teacher participation in decision-making, and individual empowerment successfully created a collaborative work climate conducive to improved performance (Sarwar et al., 2022).

2. **Informal Support and Psychological Safety**
Informal supports such as verbal encouragement, recognition of teacher achievements, and personalized mentoring played a crucial role in establishing psychological safety. This finding supports the argument by Siregar & Faddilla (2023) that emotionally safe work environments enhance creativity, self-confidence, and openness to pedagogical challenges (Siregar & Faddilla, 2023).

3. **Age-Related Challenges and Senior Teachers' Career Development**

Consistent with the field data, Ena & Djami (2021) noted that age is a significant barrier to career advancement. Teachers nearing retirement often exhibit low motivation to engage in training or pursue further education due to occupational fatigue, time constraints, and limited adaptability to technology (Ena & Djami, 2021).

4. **The Importance of Teacher Engagement in Learning Communities**
   Teacher involvement in communities of practice such as KKG, lesson study groups, and internal training was shown to foster a strong sense of ownership toward school programs. Ahmal et al. (2020) found that practice-based and collaborative training enhances pedagogical competence and cultivates a culture of lifelong learning among educators (Ahmal et al., 2020).

C. Data Visualization and Classification
1. Bar Chart – Teacher Responses to Principal Leadership
A bar chart illustrates the percentage of teachers responding positively to various aspects of principal leadership, including:
   a. Academic supervision (80%)
   b. Career motivation and support (75%)
   c. Training facilitation (85%)
   d. Open communication (90%)

2. Pie Chart – Reference Index Profile
A pie chart depicts the distribution of references based on indexing categories:
   a. Scopus Q1–Q4: 40%
   b. Web of Science: 20%
   c. Sinta 1 & 2: 30%
   d. Sinta 3–4 and others: 10%

3. Classification Table of Research Findings

Category	Common Findings	Differences Across Schools	Causes of Variation
Teacher Performance	Transformational leadership enhances motivation and productivity	Impact levels vary by school	Differences in intensity of supervision and training
Career Interest	Principal support promotes career development	Slower responses from senior teachers	Age, internal motivation, and workload
Strategy Implementation	Teacher involvement in learning communities is effective	Some schools do not actively engage in lesson study	Limitations in facilities and principal availability
Teacher Performance	Transformational leadership enhances motivation and productivity	Impact levels vary by school	Differences in intensity of supervision and training

Discussion
Implementation of School Principal Leadership in Enhancing Teacher Performance and Career Interest
The research findings indicate that the implementation of school principal leadership at SDN Sumber Harta plays a strategic role in improving both teacher performance and career interest. This is evidenced by the principal's involvement in managerial and academic activities that directly influence teachers' work ethic and professionalism.
   1. Transformational Leadership of the Principal

The principal's active involvement in daily activities, provision of clear guidance, and exemplary discipline are practical manifestations of transformational leadership. This leadership style is considered effective in influencing and motivating staff to exceed basic expectations (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The principal's support also reflects a leader who can inspire teachers to grow, as emphasized by Nuel, who states that direct involvement by leaders can foster a conducive and collaborative work culture (Nuel et al., 2021).

2. Enhancing Teacher Motivation through Recognition and Personal Approach
   Findings show that recognition, both verbal and in the form of certificates, acts as an intrinsic motivator for teachers. This aligns with Herzberg's motivation theory, in which recognition is a motivating factor that drives employees to improve performance (Herzberg, 1968). Informal support from the principal, such as casual motivational conversations, also strengthens the emotional bond between leader and staff, as noted by (Suryaningtyas, 2024).

3. Teacher Performance Supervision and Coaching
   Class supervision conducted at least once per semester serves as a means for the principal to evaluate and enhance teaching creativity and competence. Effective supervision is not only evaluative but also educational and corrective(Sonia, 2022). It also fosters reflective thinking among teachers, which is crucial for continuous professional development (Sonia, 2022).

4. Effective Communication as an Organizational Relationship Pillar
   Two-way communication between the principal and teachers helps build trust and cooperation. Smith asserts that open communication enhances organizational efficiency and reduces interpersonal conflict in the workplace (Smith et al., 2020).

5. Work Environment and Collaboration
   A positive work environment is characterized by collaboration among teachers and the principal's support in resolving daily issues. A supportive work culture reinforces a sense of unity and productivity. This aligns with Saba's study, which highlights the importance of an organizational culture that promotes teamwork in achieving institutional success (Saba, 2024).

6. Innovation in Learning
   Although not yet fully optimized, the principal's support for learning innovation reflects an awareness of the importance of 21st-century education. Tapung suggests that lesson study and technology-based training are crucial for enhancing teaching quality. Therefore, concrete strategies must be developed so that teachers not only implement innovative methods but also internalize them into the learning process (Tapung, 2024).

7. Developing Teacher Career Interests
   Principals play a vital role in facilitating teacher career development through access to training, workshops, and information on certification and scholarships. This is in line with studies by Judijanto and Rifad, which emphasize that facilitating access to competency development contributes to enhancing teachers' career interest (Rifad, 2023; Wati et al., 2024).

8. Support for Continuing Education and Certification
   Encouraging teachers to participate in PPG (teacher professional education) and pursue higher education reflects leadership that supports teacher self-actualization, as outlined by Maslow (1943). Such support strengthens teachers' commitment to their profession.

9. Addressing Challenges in Leadership Implementation
   Principals face various challenges, such as low intrinsic teacher motivation, heavy administrative burdens, and limited technological resources. Astuti mentions that lack of self-confidence is a major barrier to professional development (Astuti et al., 2023). Additionally, excessive administrative workloads reduce the effectiveness of supervision (Ernawatie et al., 2024). Nonetheless, principals manage to overcome these challenges through informal approaches, the formation of learning communities, and inter-institutional collaboration (Astuti et al., 2023; Ernawatie et al., 2024).

10. The Principal's Role as Mentor
    Overall findings reveal that the principal functions not only as an administrator but also as a mentor and facilitator of teachers' career development. This approach underscores the importance of collaborative leadership in fostering an adaptive and progressive work culture (Gaol et al., 2024; Naslim et al., 2021).

11. Recommendations for Follow-Up
    1. For Principals: Increase the frequency of supervision, organize technology based training, and award performance certificates to motivate teachers.

2. For Teachers: Participate in intergenerational mentorship programs and intensive training to develop technological skills.
3. For Policymakers: Ensure infrastructure such as internet access and IT devices is available to support technology-based learning.

The leadership of school principals in Sumber Harta District has proven to have a positive impact on enhancing teacher performance and career interest. Their collaborative approach, supervision, and moral support help create a conducive environment for professional growth. Despite challenges such as age and technological limitations, principals' strategies have successfully supported teachers in overcoming these barriers. This study supports the theory that transformational leadership is key to improving education quality at the elementary school level.

Comparison with Previous Studies

This study confirms that school leadership plays a vital role in enhancing both teacher performance and career interest. The findings extend prior research that tended to focus solely on performance. For instance, research by Abdul Mutholib emphasized the importance of leadership in improving teacher performance but did not explicitly address career interest (Mutholib et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, the study by Mashun & Saupiah highlighted the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum through training and teacher collaboration without exploring its influence on teachers' career aspirations. This study offers a new perspective by considering psychological and professional factors that shape career orientation(Mashun & Saupiah, 2021).

Fuadatul Hariroh examined the relationship between principal leadership, teacher performance, and career development, which shares thematic similarities. However, this study delves further into contextual obstacles such as nearing retirement age and technological limitations—dimensions not yet addressed in Hariroh's research (Hariroh, 2018).

Furthermore, findings by Permatasari, which support the impact of transformational leadership on teacher motivation, are reinforced by this study. It not only confirms these motivational effects but also presents practical strategies employed by principals to address local challenges such as administrative workload and technological constraints (Permatasari et al., 2023)

This discussion and comparison demonstrate that school leadership is comprehensively involved in shaping a productive work climate and supporting teachers' career development. This research not only reinforces prior findings but also broadens the scope by incorporating locally relevant contextual factors. Thus, the study contributes by offering a more holistic and applicable portrait of effective educational leadership at the elementary level.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS/IMPLICATIONS

This study concludes that school principal leadership has a significant influence on improving teacher performance and career interest. The main findings indicate that a transformational leadership style characterized by informal support, the facilitation of training, and the establishment of learning communities is effective in fostering teacher professionalism.

The contribution of this research lies in its integration of two interrelated dimensions teacher performance and career development—which have rarely been studied together. Nonetheless, the study is limited by its geographical scope and the scarcity of digital data. Further research is necessary, particularly studies that involve schools from diverse regions and employ quantitative methods to more systematically measure correlations between variables.

Practical recommendations include:
1. School principals should intensify technology-based training and implement structured lesson study programs;
2. Teachers should be encouraged to actively participate in KKG/KKS activities and peer-to-peer learning;
3. Local governments are advised to improve access to digital infrastructure and design career transition programs for senior teachers approaching retirement.

Future research should explore the relationship between school principal leadership and student learning outcomes through quantitative approaches, and broaden the scope of study to enhance the representativeness of

the findings. Study limitations include the narrow focus on a single subdistrict, a relatively short observation period, and a reliance on non-digital data, all of which may limit the generalizability of the results.

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