



Leadership Culture: Efforts to Strengthen Teacher Professionalism at MTs Negeri Luwu Utara

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(Received: February-2024; Reviewed: March-2024; Accepted: April-2024;

Available Online: May-2024; Published: May-2024)

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of transformational leadership by the madrasah principal in shaping school culture and enhancing teacher professionalism at MTs Negeri Luwu Utara. A qualitative approach was employed, using a case study method, with data gathered through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings show that the principal's leadership style includes elements of directive, supportive, participatory, and achievement-oriented approaches, demonstrating an adaptive method tailored to the institution's needs. School culture is built through teacher involvement in decision-making, open communication, innovation, and adequate performance supervision. Teacher professionalism is strengthened through providing challenges, ongoing professional development, sufficient facilities, and motivation and recognition from school leadership. Leadership values such as consistency, a future-oriented vision, collaboration, role modeling, and caring are key drivers in fostering a positive school culture and improving teacher professionalism. The connection between leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism is mutually reinforcing, creating an educational environment that is supportive, collaborative, and focused on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. This study recommends strengthening transformational leadership as a strategic approach to elevate the quality of madrasah education.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, School Culture, Teacher Professionalism, Madrasah, Education Quality.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of education in Indonesia, developing high-quality human resources has become a vital need for tackling global challenges. Madrasahs, as Islamic educational institutions, play a strategic role in shaping a generation that is both intellectually capable and morally upright. However, reports indicate that many madrasahs still face challenges in fostering a positive school culture and enhancing teacher professionalism. In some cases, leadership practices have not yet led to the transformative changes needed to significantly improve educational quality, including at MTs Negeri Luwu Utara, which is currently working to sustainably improve teacher performance and institutional culture.

Socially, the complexity of the teacher's role in modern education requires a high level of professionalism, supported by visionary and transformative leadership from the madrasah principal. Teachers are no longer just content providers but are expected to serve as facilitators, motivators, and innovators in the learning process. Unfortunately, in many madrasahs, issues such as a weak collaborative spirit, insufficient in-depth supervision, and limited recognition of teacher performance continue. These conditions reflect a weak school culture, which ideally should serve as the foundation for creating a supportive and effective learning environment that promotes educator professionalism.

Many studies in the literature highlight that school or madrasah leadership plays a vital role in developing a strong, quality-driven school culture. According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2006), transformational leadership promotes commitment, boosts capacity, and increases teacher motivation for professional growth. This idea is also supported by Bass and Avolio (1994), who say that transformational leadership includes the aspects of inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealised influence all of which are essential for cultural change within educational organizations.

The literature also shows that a supportive school culture encourages the development of core values such as discipline, collaboration, responsibility, and innovation in teaching and learning practices. Stoll and Fink (1996) argue that school culture reflects the values, beliefs, and norms that influence how individuals behave and interact. In the context of madrasahs, a culture shaped by teacher involvement, consistent policies, and character-driven leadership significantly influences the level of teacher professionalism and the quality of student learning outcomes.

Therefore, strengthening the link between leadership and school culture is a vital step in improving education quality. Building on this foundation, the present study aims to examine the role of transformational leadership by the madrasah principal in shaping school culture and promoting teacher professionalism at MTs Negeri Luwu Utara. The main focus is on the leadership styles used, the nature of the resulting school culture, and the strategies employed to enhance teacher professionalism.

This research is important because few studies examine the overall relationship between transformational leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism within the specific context of madrasahs. Additionally, the findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of leadership strategies in Islamic educational institutions, especially in advancing a high-quality, values-based educational vision.

This study is grounded in transformational leadership theory, originally developed by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass and Avolio (1994). This theory emphasizes the role of leaders in inspiring and motivating subordinates to achieve higher goals through idealized influence, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation. A madrasah principal who adopts this approach is expected to drive organizational cultural change and holistically improve the quality of human resources.

Furthermore, Schein's (2010) theory of organizational culture provides a key framework for understanding how values, norms, and practices within an educational institution are created and developed. A strong school culture not only shapes institutional identity but also functions as a form of social control that guides the behavior of teachers, students, and the entire school community. Leadership aligned with positive cultural values can significantly boost teacher loyalty and performance.

Finally, the improvement of teacher professionalism can be explained through the theory of continuous professional development (CPD), which emphasizes the importance of training, reflection, managerial support, and recognition in enhancing teacher competence. In this context, the role of the school principal as both a facilitator and motivator becomes vital in establishing a sustainable teacher development system that directly elevates the quality of learning.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This method was chosen because it is best suited for exploring in depth the phenomena of transformative leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism within a specific context, specifically at MTs Negeri Luwu Utara. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to understand meaning, processes, and social dynamics in a comprehensive and contextual way from the perspective of the subjects involved.

Research Site and Subjects

The study was conducted at MTs Negeri Luwu Utara, South Sulawesi, chosen intentionally because the institution is believed to be working on transforming its organizational culture and improving teacher professionalism under the leadership of a transformative school principal. The research participants included the school principal, teachers, and educational staff directly involved in leadership practices, shaping the school culture, and developing teacher professionalism at the institution.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were gathered using multiple methods. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, and administrative staff to collect insights on leadership styles, school cultural values, and strategies for enhancing teacher professionalism. Next, participant observation was carried out by directly observing the principal's leadership activities, interactions among school members, teachers' activities, and overall school culture during routine tasks. Finally, a review of official documents was performed, including the school's vision and mission, the principal's work programs, teacher development reports, meeting minutes, and results of academic supervision.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analysed using the Miles and Huberman (2014) model, which consists of three main stages:

- Data condensation involves selecting, categorising, and focusing the data collected from the field based on key themes such as leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism.
- Data display involves organising data into descriptive narratives, matrices, or thematic tables to assist the researcher in identifying patterns and relationships among variables.
- Conclusion drawing and verification involve interpreting data, uncovering meanings, and making inferences about how transformative leadership influences school culture and boosts teacher professionalism.

This method offers a comprehensive understanding of how the school principal's transformative leadership fosters a positive school culture and enhances teacher professionalism at MTs Negeri Luwu Utara.

RESULT

Leadership Pattern of the Principal of MTs Negeri Luwu Utara

The findings reveal that the principal of MTs Negeri Luwu Utara employs an adaptive and transformative leadership style that integrates directive, supportive, participatory, and achievement-oriented approaches. This was clearly demonstrated in the principal's interview, who stated:

“In leading, I aim to guide teachers so that they understand the school's vision. But I also create space for them to express their opinions. We cannot rely on a one-way approach; I want to build a strong team.” (Informant: School Principal)

This participatory leadership approach was directly experienced by the teachers. One teacher remarked that the principal often involves them in strategic decision-making.

“We often take part in school policy meetings, such as task allocation or student development programmes. The principal does not make decisions alone but always invites us to discuss together.”

A positive school culture has been cultivated through open and collaborative communication, as well as promoting innovation in teaching and learning. One teacher emphasised that the working environment in the school strongly encourages openness.

“We can speak directly with the principal at any time. There is no distance. If we have ideas or criticisms, we can share them. That makes us feel comfortable and respected.”

In addition, the principal also encourages teachers to innovate and improve their performance through supervision that is not controlling but rather supportive. A science teacher remarked:

“After teaching, sometimes he asks how the lesson went. He doesn’t just evaluate, but also gives feedback and new ideas. We don’t feel monitored, but guided.” (Informant: Science Teacher)

Teacher professionalism has become a key focus of the principal’s leadership. This is achieved through offering challenges, ongoing training, and supportive facilities. An Arabic language teacher explained:

“We are often included in training, both organized by the school and external institutions. In addition, he provides internet access in the teachers’ room, LCD projectors in every classroom, and fully supports us when we want to develop learning media.” (Informant: Arabic Language Teacher)

Motivation is also provided through recognition and appreciation of teachers’ achievements. Teachers who show accomplishments or initiatives receive direct praise from the headteacher. A senior teacher stated:

“If a teacher succeeds in leading students to win competitions or creates an innovation, he usually announces it at the flag ceremony. Sometimes certificates or small gifts are given. That makes us feel appreciated.” (Informant: Senior Teacher)

Overall, the leadership style used by the principal of MTs Negeri Luwu Utara has successfully fostered a positive school culture and advanced teacher professionalism. The open, trusting, and achievement-oriented relationship between the principal and teachers has created an environment that is active and reflective, transforming the school into a vibrant learning community. This humanistic and visionary leadership forms the main basis for building sustainable educational quality.

The Relationship between Leadership and School Culture

The findings show that the principal's leadership is crucial in building a positive school culture and enhancing teacher professionalism. The principal is perceived as having successfully created an environment that is supportive through a communicative, consistent, and inclusive leadership style. In an interview, the principal described his approach:

“I always strive to build open communication with all teachers. Every major decision in the school must be the result of deliberation. Without good communication, there will be no sense of belonging to this institution.” (Informant: Principal)

The importance of open communication was also directly experienced by the teachers. One teacher stated that a healthy and participatory work climate was established due to the principal’s non-authoritarian leadership style:

“We feel respected because our voices are heard. The principal always explains the reasons behind every policy. That makes us feel like part of this school, not just task executors.” (Informant: Indonesian Language Teacher)

Consistent policies and shared values of unity laid the groundwork for building a positive school culture. Teachers noticed consistency between the principal's words and actions. A teacher remarked:

“Whatever he says in meetings, he practices himself. For example, being punctual or the way he interacts with students. That makes us follow his example.” (Informant: Islamic Education Teacher)

Beyond shaping a healthy school culture, the principal also promoted teacher professionalism in various ways. One teacher emphasised the importance of training and regular supervision:

“He often encourages us to participate in training or online workshops. We are also supervised regularly, but not to find mistakes—more to provide feedback so we can grow.” (Informant: Mathematics Teacher)

Other support was provided through facilitation and motivation. The principal supplied learning facilities and infrastructure, while also recognizing teachers who demonstrated dedication and achievement. An English teacher explained:

“Every teacher is given space to innovate. If there is an idea for teaching or extracurricular programs, he always supports it. Sometimes we even receive small incentives or recognition in school forums as a form of appreciation.” (Informant: English Teacher)

The relationship between leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism at MTs Negeri Luwu Utara seems to be mutually reinforcing. Together, they form an integrated system that supports the development of quality education. A senior teacher described this clearly:

“If the leader is good, the work culture is healthy, and teachers become motivated. When teachers are professional, students also feel the impact. All of these are interconnected.” (Informant: Senior Teacher/Subject Coordinator)

These interview data show that the principal’s leadership acts not only as a director but also as the main driving force in building a strong organizational culture and encouraging teacher professionalism. This balanced and organized relationship has allowed MTs Negeri Luwu Utara to keep improving toward becoming an excellent institution dedicated to reaching comprehensive educational goals.

Leadership Values of the Principal of MTs Negeri Luwu Utara

The leadership qualities demonstrated by the principal of MTs Negeri Luwu Utara have proven to play a vital role in shaping a strong school culture and enhancing teacher professionalism. Consistent leadership in enforcing rules and commitments establishes the groundwork for fostering work discipline. In an interview, the principal emphasized:

“I always stress the importance of consistency, starting from small matters such as punctuality, dress code, to teaching responsibilities. If the leader is not disciplined, how can teachers and students be disciplined?” (Informant: Principal)

Teachers viewed this consistent leadership attitude as a sign of professionalism. One teacher noted:

“The principal is always punctual and does not hesitate to remind us if something is against the rules. That actually makes us more orderly, because he sets a direct example.” (Informant: Arts Teacher)

Beyond consistency, the forward-looking vision supported by the principal has also promoted improvements in educational quality. This vision is achieved through various teacher training and capacity-building programs. An Arabic language teacher explained:

“Every semester, there are always competency-improvement programs, whether workshops, seminars, or training in learning technology. All of this is directed by the principal, who truly wants this school to progress.” (Informant: Arabic Teacher)

A strong collaboration between the headteacher and the entire school community serves as the foundation for harmonious working relationships. Teachers feel they are not just subordinates but valued members of a trusted team with opportunities to contribute. A social studies teacher shared:

“We are often invited to meetings to design programs and are even given direct responsibilities. The principal does not work alone but builds solidarity. That makes us feel trusted and motivated.” (Informant: Social Studies Teacher) Equally important, the principal’s care and exemplary conduct provide great motivation for teachers to enhance their professionalism. A senior teacher explained:

“He is very caring. If a teacher is sick or facing difficulties, he comes directly. He always sets an example in teaching, interacting, and behaving. It makes us feel ashamed if we don’t also strive to improve ourselves.” (Informant: Senior Teacher/Curriculum Coordinator)

Support and appreciation for teachers’ work also form part of the leadership values practised. Teachers who show dedication and innovation receive recognition that motivates them to keep developing. A computer studies teacher stated:

“Whenever we complete a program or project, there is always some form of appreciation. It may not always be material, but it could be recognition in the school forum or opportunities to join external activities. That motivates us to keep contributing.” (Informant: ICT Teacher)

Based on these interview findings, leadership qualities such as consistency, vision, collaboration, care, and appreciation have fostered a positive and supportive school culture. In this setting, teachers are encouraged to grow professionally, and the overall quality of education enhances, emphasizing collective progress.

DISCUSSION

The study’s findings suggest that the leadership style of the madrasah principal—characterized by being directive, supportive, participatory, and achievement-oriented—embodies a transformative approach that addresses the evolving needs of the institution. This leadership style not only offers structural guidance to teachers but also encourages participation and recognizes teachers’ roles as the main agents of change. Teachers’ involvement in decision-making and the development of two-way communication foster a strong sense of ownership of the institution. Additionally, support for innovation and developmental supervision help create a dynamic, reflective, and productive school culture. In this context, leadership functions as the key driving force in shaping a positive organizational character within the school.

Furthermore, the close connection between leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism is a key finding of this research. Effective leadership not only creates a supportive and positive environment but also promotes values of unity and consistency in policy implementation. This directly impacts the development of a professional attitude among teachers. The principal serves as both facilitator and motivator through training opportunities, constructive supervision, and recognizing teachers' performance. These three elements—leadership, culture, and professionalism—support each other mutually, forming a healthy ecosystem focused on achieving educational goals.

Furthermore, the strong connection between leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism emerges as a key finding of this research. Effective leadership not only creates a supportive and positive environment but also encourages shared values and consistency in policy enforcement. This directly helps develop a sense of professionalism among teachers. The principal serves as both a facilitator and motivator through training sessions, constructive supervision, and recognizing teachers' performance. These three elements—leadership, culture, and professionalism—interact to support each other and create a healthy ecosystem dedicated to achieving educational goals.

These findings are supported by the theory of transformative leadership developed by Burns (1978) and further elaborated by Bass and Avolio (1994), which states that transformative leaders can inspire, provide idealized influence, attend to individual needs, and intellectually stimulate their followers. A madrasah principal practicing transformative leadership will encourage teachers to innovate, stay committed, and continually improve their skills. Additionally, Schein's (2010) theory of organizational culture highlights that culture is shaped through shared values consistently demonstrated in an institution's daily activities. In the context of a madrasah, the leadership qualities embodied by the principal serve as a strong foundation for fostering a collaborative, quality-focused work environment.

Empirically, the results of this study align with the findings of Leithwood et al. (2008), who stated that leadership has an indirect yet significant influence on improving learning outcomes through developing organizational culture and enhancing teacher capacity. Similarly, research by Hallinger and Heck (2010) showed that a supportive work environment and a collaborative culture established by the school principal are positively linked to the advancement of teacher professionalism. This reinforces the understanding that strong leadership not only guides the organization but also shapes the identity and ethos of the school community.

The results of this study are significant for both theory and prior research, as they clearly show how leadership functions not only at the administrative level but also in shaping values, work ethics, and interpersonal relationships within the madrasah. The principal's leadership—emphasizing open communication, participation, and recognition—has fostered a school culture focused on learning and professional growth. Outstanding behavior and attentiveness to teachers' needs further enhance professionalism rooted in awareness and dedication rather than bureaucratic enforcement.

Furthermore, another crucial aspect is understanding that developing teacher professionalism relies on a supportive work environment. A madrasah principal with a

progressive vision who can create a participatory and collaborative system will inspire teachers to learn, grow, and actively contribute to the school's transformation. In this context, leadership theory and organizational culture provide important frameworks for explaining how the quality of education depends on values and social relationships.

The practical implications of this study indicate that strengthening the leadership of madrasah principals is essential not only for managerial tasks but also for building relationships and a positive work environment. Training and leadership development programs for principals should emphasize not only administrative skills but also social-emotional abilities, communication, and visionary leadership. Emphasizing leadership qualities such as exemplary conduct, empathy, and openness is crucial for fostering a healthy school culture that enhances teacher professionalism.

Furthermore, these findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders within the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Department of Education to develop sustainable and context-specific principal development programs. A transformative leadership approach has proven effective in addressing the challenges of educational quality at the madrasah level. If these leadership principles can be adopted in other madrasahs, there will be a greater chance to improve the quality of Islamic education in Indonesia in a more equitable and sustainable way.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the transformative leadership of madrasah principals is crucial in shaping a positive school culture and enhancing teacher professionalism at MTs Negeri Luwu Utara. The leadership styles used include directive, supportive, participatory, and achievement-oriented approaches. These strategies promote a supportive, collaborative work environment focused on developing educators' skills.

The emerging madrasah culture is characterized by open communication, teacher involvement in decision-making, and encouragement of innovation in teaching. Meanwhile, teacher professionalism develops through ongoing training, supportive facilities, constructive supervision, and recognition of performance. The relationship between leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism is mutually reinforcing, thereby fostering an educational environment that is character-driven, reflective, and productive.

A key finding of this study is the identification of holistic leadership qualities of the madrasah principal—consistency, vision for the future, empathy, and exemplary conduct—that simultaneously promote organizational cultural change and teacher professional development. Another unique contribution is uncovering how the synergy between the principal's personal values and a collaborative approach creates a sustainable, quality-focused madrasah education ecosystem. These findings offer both theoretical and practical insights into strengthening value-based educational leadership models, particularly within the context of madrasahs in Indonesia.

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