



THE INFLUENCE OF PRINCIPAL'S TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP STYLE, SCHOOL CULTURE, AND TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM ON LEARNING QUALITY IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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Article History

Received : 30/03/2025

Revised : 17/04/2025

Accepted : 28/04/2025

Keywords:

Transformational leadership, School culture, Teacher professionalism, Quality of learning..

Abstract. The quality of learning in schools is shaped by several key factors, including the principal's leadership style, school culture, and teacher professionalism. This research aims to examine the individual and combined effects of these factors on the learning quality in public junior high schools in the Kendal region. Using a quantitative approach, the study collected data from 118 respondents across 4 schools through observations and questionnaires. The findings indicate that (1) transformational leadership significantly influences the quality of learning, accounting for 73.3% of its variation. (2) School culture also plays a crucial role, explaining 68.9% of the variation in learning quality. (3) Teacher professionalism is another important factor, contributing 73.0% to the variation in learning outcomes. (4) When combined, transformational leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism together account for 78.7% of the variation in learning quality. To improve learning outcomes, it is recommended that school principals focus on developing a transformational leadership style through ongoing training. Additionally, schools should actively nurture a positive and strong culture by engaging the entire educational community, including teachers, students, and parents. Teachers are encouraged to enhance their professionalism through structured training, continuous personal development, and fostering a high level of commitment to their teaching responsibilities.

How to Cite: Setiyanti, W., Kusumaningsih, W., & Nurkolis, N. (2025). THE INFLUENCE OF PRINCIPAL'S TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP STYLE, SCHOOL CULTURE, AND TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM ON LEARNING QUALITY IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL. *Prima Magistra: Jurnal Ilmiah Kependidikan*, 6(2), 158-166. <https://doi.org/10.37478/jpm.v6i2.5133>

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Publisher:

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INTRODUCTION

Merdeka Belajar is a policy that grants schools and students the freedom to design flexible and relevant learning processes to optimize individual potential (Rosmana et al., 2023). Its success largely depends on the readiness of teachers to support active and meaningful learning, enabling students to develop both academically and non-academically. The Merdeka Curriculum, as the core of Merdeka Belajar, offers flexibility in curriculum design and allows students to choose subjects according to their interests and talents (Rahim & Ismaya, 2023). This approach aims to improve learning processes hindered by the pandemic and to develop students' potential optimally. However, challenges arise in its implementation, such as monotonous teaching practices, unprepared teachers, and insufficient resources, including limited teacher training. The quality of learning at SMP Negeri Kendal faces similar challenges, where teachers struggle to adapt to active learning approaches. Although some schools have shown improvement in student scores, learning quality remains constrained by a lack of method variety and limited support from school principals. Enhancing teacher training and educational infrastructure is essential to support the success of the Merdeka Curriculum in this region.

In general, educational reports show that the quality of learning is greatly influenced by school leadership, school culture, teacher professionalism, and support for professional development (Mailani et al., 2023). Principals who have not yet led effectively, school cultures that do not encourage innovation, and teachers with low competence are the main obstacles to implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Rozalina et al., 2020). To address this, comprehensive efforts are needed, including improving school culture, strengthening leadership, enhancing

teacher competence, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, to create a quality learning environment that supports the curriculum's success.

Nursita et al. (2023) also found that both school culture and principal leadership have a strong influence on teacher performance. Combined, they are even more significant in creating optimal working conditions for teachers. Similar findings were reported by Ningsih (2020), who revealed that principal leadership and teacher professionalism greatly contribute to teacher performance at SMK Negeri 4 Metro. Strong teacher performance, of course, directly impacts better learning quality. Furthermore, Suwarni (2022) added that an inclusive, collaborative, and student-centered school culture is crucial in creating a conducive learning environment. These research findings show that a positive school culture can create a comfortable atmosphere for students to achieve their best potential. In the context of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, Wardana et al. (2023) identified several issues hindering the implementation of Indonesian language learning at SMP Surakarta.

Several studies indicate that organizational culture has a significant influence, while other research shows that organizational culture does not significantly affect teacher performance, highlighting the need for further investigation to understand the factors behind these differing findings. Additionally, there is a lack of understanding regarding the role of intervening variables, such as job satisfaction, which could mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and teacher performance topics that have been discussed in previous studies but have not yet been deeply explored. Although these issues are more specifically related to certain subjects, the findings remain relevant, considering that internal factors such as principal leadership and school culture also play a role in addressing these barriers. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by testing the hypothesis that principal leadership, innovative school culture, and teacher professionalism contribute significantly to improving learning quality in schools across the Kendal region.

The identification and delimitation of the research problems stem from the reality that, although the Merdeka Curriculum holds much potential, its implementation still faces numerous challenges that hinder the achievement of optimal learning quality. Several key issues identified include the lack of teacher competence in designing student-centered learning, limited supporting facilities such as libraries and technology, minimal understanding and support from parents, high administrative burdens on teachers, and weak coordination among relevant parties (Saputra & Stiawan, 2024). More specifically, internal school factors influencing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum include the principal's transformational leadership style, teachers' pedagogical competence and motivation, collaborative school culture, and the availability of adequate facilities and infrastructure. External factors include supportive education policies, community support especially from parents and developments in information technology that provide new opportunities for learning. To clarify the scope of the study, several key terms are also defined: leadership style is focused on transformational aspects (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration) school culture includes self-awareness, personality, performance, team orientation, and recognition; and teacher professionalism focuses on pedagogical, social, and personal competencies (Inviolata et al., 2025). This research also limits its scope to schools located in the Kendal geographic region. Based on these identified problems, this study is formulated to answer questions regarding the influence of each variable (transformational leadership, school culture, teacher professionalism) on learning quality in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, both partially and simultaneously, with the ultimate goal of analyzing these relationships in depth within the context of schools in the Kendal region.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative approach with an associative design aimed at examining the relationships between the investigated variables through the collection of numerical data and statistical analysis. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to identify causal relationships between existing variables and contributes to the



development of more comprehensive theoretical frameworks in the studied field. The quantitative approach and associative design support the testing of proposed hypotheses (Akbar et al., 2023), by gathering numerical data that is subsequently analyzed statistically using SPSS version 25.

The population in this study comprised all teachers teaching at four junior high schools (SMP) in Kendal Regency: SMPN 2 Pegandon, SMPN 1 Kendal, SMPN 2 Kendal, and SMPN 3 Kendal, totaling 147 teachers. Given the relatively large population, sampling was conducted using proportional random sampling, where samples were randomly selected while considering the proportional representation of each school. Based on the Krejcie table, the ideal sample size was determined to be 118 teachers, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The research instrument used was a Likert-scale questionnaire, which enabled the researcher to measure respondents' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions regarding variables such as principal leadership style, school culture, and teacher professionalism. The questionnaire consisted of several statements that respondents answered by selecting one of the provided options, such as strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. Data were collected through both observation and questionnaires: observations were conducted to gain a direct understanding of situations or events relevant to the research, while questionnaires gathered written responses from the teachers.

For data analysis, this study implemented two stages of statistical analysis. The first stage was data description, using descriptive statistics to present the data in an easily understood format, such as tables, graphs, or basic figures (mean, median, mode, standard deviation). The second stage involved inferential statistical tests, aimed at drawing further conclusions about the relationships between variables, including t-tests and F-tests to assess the influence of independent variables on the dependent variable. Additionally, this study conducted validity and reliability tests to ensure the quality of the instruments used. The validity test ensured that the measurement instruments accurately measured what they were intended to measure, while the reliability test assessed the consistency of the instrument's results. Validity and reliability were tested using correlation coefficient tests and Cronbach's Alpha. Classical assumption tests, such as normality, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity tests, were also performed to ensure that the data met the necessary assumptions before proceeding to multiple linear regression analysis. The normality test examined whether the data were normally distributed (Ahadi & Zain, 2023), the multicollinearity test assessed the presence of strong relationships among independent variables (Suhartini, 2021), and the heteroscedasticity test checked whether the residual variance in the regression model was consistent (Silalahi et al., 2024). Thus, this study integrated various statistical analysis techniques to test the hypotheses and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the studied field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The transformational leadership style of the principal is one of the key factors suspected to influence the quality of teaching and learning. To understand how teachers perceive the principal's leadership style, the following data provides a comprehensive overview. The questionnaire measured leadership style using a 5-point Likert scale, where the highest score indicates a very good level of transformational leadership. The following table (Table 1) presents the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents' answers regarding the leadership style applied by the principal. Based on the frequency distribution on Table 1, it can be seen that out of 118 teacher respondents, the majority (28.8%) rated their principal's leadership style as "Very Poor" with a score range of 73–83. A similar proportion (13.6%) rated it as "Poor" with a score range of 84–94. Meanwhile, only a small portion (16.1%) rated it as "Very Good" with a score range of 117–125, and 22.9% rated it as "Good" with a score range of 106–116. The remaining 18.6% rated it as "Fairly Good" with a score range of 95–105. Overall, this data indicates that teachers' perceptions of the principal's leadership style in the region tend to be negative. The majority of teachers feel that their principal's leadership is "Very Poor" or "Poor." Only a small portion gave positive ratings ("Good" or "Very Good").



This indicates the need for evaluation and improvement in the principal's leadership style in the Kendal region. Efforts are needed to understand the factors behind these negative perceptions, as well as to design relevant leadership training and development programs to improve leadership quality in these schools.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Principal's Leadership Style

Criteria	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Good	117–125	19	16.1
Good	106–116	27	22.9
Fairly Good	95–105	22	18.6
Poor	84–94	16	13.6
Very Poor	73–83	34	28.8
Total		118	100

The principal's leadership style is a crucial element in a school's success because it plays a key role in directing, motivating, and inspiring all school members to achieve shared educational goals (Syakhrani, 2024). Leadership is defined as the process of influencing others to work collaboratively, whether through motivation, influence, or interpersonal relationships (Setiawan, 2021). As the highest leader in the school, the principal bears significant responsibility for managing resources, fostering positive relationships, and driving innovation to create a supportive learning environment (Ihsan & Masruroh, 2025). In the context of decentralization, principals must master transactional, transformational, and visionary leadership styles (Kumala et al., 2022). Among these, transformational leadership is considered the most effective, as it inspires and motivates team members to transcend personal interests for the sake of collective goals while promoting positive change at both the individual and organizational levels (Santoso & Perkasa, 2025). A transformational leader not only serves as a role model but also actively builds team spirit, dedication, and trust, thereby fostering outstanding performance and a conducive work environment for growth (Permatasari et al., 2023).

School culture reflects the way of life, values, beliefs, and habits embraced by all members of the school community, encompassing the norms, traditions, and symbols that shape a school's unique identity (Januar & Amsari, 2023). School culture emerges not only from teacher-student interactions but also involves the principal, staff, the surrounding community, and all stakeholders (Zuriati et al., 2025). It functions as the "soul" that influences every aspect of school life, motivating, guiding behavior, and supporting the achievement of educational objectives (Septiliani et al., 2023). Similar to organizational culture in general, school culture serves as an identity differentiator, a unifying force, a creator of a positive environment, a behavioral guide, and a tool to maintain stability and foster collective commitment (Hana et al., 2020). A positive culture fosters a sense of belonging, encourages innovation, and facilitates the achievement of shared goals; however, if too rigid, it can hinder necessary change (Cintiara et al., 2025). Building school culture is a long-term process involving the active roles of school leaders, founders, owners, internal and external resources, as well as the broader community (Jismin et al., 2022). Schools are expected to serve as centers for character building, moral cultivation, the dissemination of positive values, and the delivery of understanding about the negative impacts of deviant behaviors. All of this requires continuous collective effort to allow positive school culture to grow and thrive.

Teacher professionalism encompasses a comprehensive understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and competencies that an educator must possess (Sitanggang & Naibaho, 2023). According to Indonesian Law No. 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers, an ideal teacher embodies four core competencies: pedagogical (effective teaching skills), personal (exemplary character), professional (subject matter expertise), and social (interpersonal abilities). Professionalism is also defined as specialized expertise gained through formal education and continuously developed through training, with the goal of providing benefits to society (Anwar, 2020). A professional teacher not only masters the subject matter but also creates an enjoyable



learning atmosphere, motivates students, and acts as a facilitator and guide (Ali, 2022). Teacher competencies include the ability to plan, implement, and evaluate learning; mastery of teaching materials; and effective classroom interaction management (Cikka, 2020). Additionally, professional teachers are characterized by high dedication to students, mastery of subject matter and methods, evaluation skills, critical and reflective thinking, and active participation in professional communities. They also understand student characteristics, leverage technology, act fairly, exhibit patience, and collaborate well with colleagues. The dimensions of teacher professionalism encompass dedication to students, mastery of content, evaluative ability, systematic thinking, and commitment to self-development, ensuring that teachers not only focus on delivering knowledge but also on nurturing students' potential and character within an inclusive and meaningful learning environment.

Tabel 2 showing the results of the hypothesis test examining the impact of several factors on the quality of learning. The factors tested include Leadership Style, School Culture, and Teacher Professionalism. The first column lists the variables being tested for their impact on the quality of learning. The second column shows the F-value, which indicates how well the model represents the relationship between the independent variables and the quality of learning. The higher the F-value, the stronger the relationship between the variable and the quality of learning. The third column shows the Sig. F, which is the p-value for the F-test. If the p-value is less than 0.05, the factor is considered to have a significant effect on the quality of learning. The fourth column shows the Regression Coefficient, which indicates the strength and direction of the relationship between the independent variables and the quality of learning. The higher the regression coefficient, the greater the impact. The fifth column is R², which measures how much of the variation in the quality of learning can be explained by the independent variables. An R² value close to 1 indicates that the model can explain most of the variation in the quality of learning. All the variables tested, namely leadership style, school culture, and teacher professionalism, have a significant impact on the quality of learning. Additionally, the simultaneous effect of all three factors also shows a significant impact on the quality of learning.

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing Results

Influential Variable	F-value	Sig. F	Regression Coefficient	R ²	Conclusion
Leadership Style	318.307	0	0.856	0.73	Significant influence on learning quality
School Culture	257.526	0	1.015	0.708	Significant influence on learning quality
Teacher Professionalism	313.152	0	0.741	0.725	Significant influence on learning quality
Simultaneous (Leadership Style, School Culture, Teacher Professionalism)	140.052	0	-	0.787	Significant simultaneous influence on learning quality

The analysis shows that leadership style has a significant positive influence on the quality of learning, as indicated by an F-value of 318.307 and a p-value below 0.05, with a regression coefficient of 0.856. Similarly, school culture significantly affects the quality of learning, demonstrated by an F-value of 257.526 and a p-value below 0.05, with a regression coefficient of 1.015. Furthermore, teacher professionalism also shows a significant positive impact on the quality of learning, with an F-value of 313.152, a p-value below 0.05, and a regression coefficient of 0.741. Finally, the simultaneous test reveals that leadership style, school culture, and teacher professionalism together significantly influence the quality of learning, as reflected in an F-value of 140.052, a p-value below 0.05, and an R² of 0.787. Overall, it can be concluded that these three factors, both individually and collectively, play a significant and positive role in enhancing the quality of learning.

This study provides an in-depth overview of the factors influencing the quality of learning in secondary schools in the Kendal area. Three key factors were found to significantly affect the



quality of learning: the transformational leadership style of the school principal, school culture, and teacher professionalism. These three factors play a simultaneous role in creating a conducive learning environment, which in turn contributes to the improvement of learning quality.

First, the transformational leadership style of the school principal has a very strong influence on the quality of learning. Based on the analysis, the R-squared value of 0.733 indicates that nearly 74% of the variation in learning quality can be explained by the principal's leadership style. With an F-value of 318.307 and a significance of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$), these results confirm that transformational leadership has a very significant effect on learning quality. A principal with a transformational leadership style is able to inspire and motivate teachers, creating a clear vision of learning objectives. They provide the necessary support for teachers to develop professionally and empower them to apply more effective teaching approaches. Therefore, the role of the principal is crucial in creating an environment that facilitates teacher development and the implementation of innovative teaching methods.

Next, school culture has also been shown to have a significant impact on learning quality, with an R-squared value of 0.689, indicating that 68.9% of the variation in learning quality can be explained by school culture. The F-value of 257.526 with a significance of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) further strengthens the fact that school culture plays an important role in determining the quality of learning. A positive school culture, which includes values, beliefs, and practices shared by the entire school community, can create an atmosphere that supports effective learning (Anggraini et al., 2024). An innovative and results-oriented school culture can foster an environment that encourages collaboration between teachers and students, as well as mutual support (Lutfiartha, & Miyono, 2025). Additionally, a school culture that emphasizes collaboration, inclusivity, and the involvement of all stakeholders can strengthen social bonds within the school, ultimately leading to better learning quality (Murtopo et al., 2024).

Teacher professionalism also plays an equally important role in improving learning quality (Been, 2021). The analysis shows that teacher professionalism has a significant effect on learning quality, with an R-squared value of 0.730 and an F-value of 313.152 ($p < 0.05$). Teacher professionalism here refers to the level of competence, commitment, and responsibility that teachers have in performing their teaching duties. Teachers with high professionalism can plan, execute, and evaluate lessons more effectively, thereby creating a more effective learning environment. As explained by Sam & Sulastri (2024), professional teachers not only master the subject matter well but also apply effective pedagogical skills and continually develop themselves through ongoing training and professional development. The positive influence of teacher professionalism on learning quality is also in line with research by Wardana et al. (2023), which shows that highly professional teachers can adapt to curriculum changes and create more innovative learning experiences.

Simultaneously, the three independent variables transformational leadership style, school culture, and teacher professionalism have a significant effect on learning quality. According to the analysis, the R-squared value of 0.787 indicates that 78.7% of the variation in learning quality can be explained by the combination of these three factors. The F-value of 140.052 with a significance of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) shows that these factors interact and have a strong impact on learning quality. A principal with good transformational leadership can create a positive school culture and support the professional development of teachers, which in turn creates a conducive learning environment and improves learning quality. Individually, each factor also has a significant influence. The transformational leadership style, with a regression coefficient of 0.385, has the greatest positive impact on learning quality. This indicates that for every one-unit increase in transformational leadership, learning quality will increase by 0.385 units. Next, school culture has a positive influence of 0.293, meaning that for every one-unit increase in school culture, learning quality will increase by 0.293 units. Finally, teacher professionalism has a positive impact of 0.262, indicating that an increase of one unit in teacher professionalism will improve learning quality by 0.262 units. The significance of these three factors ($p < 0.05$) shows that the influence of transformational leadership, school culture, and teacher professionalism on

learning quality is statistically significant. Overall, this study highlights the importance of the roles of the principal, school culture, and teacher professionalism in improving the quality of learning in secondary schools in the Kendal area. These three factors not only reinforce each other but also create an educational environment that supports the achievement of high-quality learning goals. Therefore, efforts to improve learning quality in schools must involve the simultaneous development of these three factors.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the results of the research and the analysis and synthesis of the discussion, this chapter presents the conclusion, which summarizes the key findings. These conclusions form the basis for the formulation of recommendations expected to contribute to the development of research in the field of education. Transformational Leadership Style shows that the dimension of Intellectual Stimulation has the highest loading factor (0.904), indicating that the principal's ability to inspire creativity is the most dominant factor. The R^2 value of 0.733 indicates that leadership style can explain 73.3% of the variation in learning quality, making it a strong predictor. The regression coefficient of 0.856 indicates that for every one-unit increase in leadership style, the quality of learning will increase by 0.856 units. This highlights the important role of the principal's leadership style in improving learning quality.

School Culture, with the Aggressiveness dimension having the highest loading factor (0.874), shows that teachers' assertive understanding in conveying ideas is key to building a positive culture. The R^2 value of 0.689 indicates that school culture can explain 68.9% of the variation in learning quality. The regression coefficient of 1.015 indicates that for every one-unit increase in school culture, the quality of learning will increase by 1.015 units. This demonstrates the significance of school culture in creating a conducive and quality learning environment. Teacher Professionalism, with the Dedication dimension having the highest loading factor (0.872), reflects the commitment of teachers as a fundamental factor in supporting the success of the learning process. The R^2 value of 0.730 indicates that 73% of the variation in learning quality can be explained by teacher professionalism. The regression coefficient of 0.741 confirms that for every one-unit increase in teacher professionalism, the quality of learning will increase by 0.741 units. This emphasizes that the quality and dedication of teachers play an important role in supporting the teaching and learning process.

Learning Quality, with the Effective Learning Process dimension, successfully explains 40.073% of the data variance, indicating that various engaging teaching methods are key to improving education quality. The multiple regression model shows an R^2 value of 0.787, meaning 78.7% of the variation in learning quality is explained by the three independent variables. These three variables play a significant role simultaneously in determining the quality of learning. Each one-unit increase in Leadership Style (0.385), School Culture (0.293), and Teacher Professionalism (0.262) contributes positively to improving learning quality, with Leadership Style being the most dominant factor in this model. Overall, the three factors Leadership Style, School Culture, and Teacher Professionalism have a significant influence on improving learning quality in secondary schools, with Leadership Style being the most influential factor.

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