

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AND TEACHER MOTIVATION IN ISLAMIC VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This study examines how school leadership practices affect teacher motivation and professional performance in Islamic vocational education. While leadership has been widely studied in general education, evidence from Islamic vocational schools, especially from the perspective of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers, remains limited. This qualitative case study was conducted in an Islamic vocational school in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, involving the principal and PAI teachers. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that visionary, participative, and value-based leadership practices strengthen teachers' intrinsic motivation, work discipline, professional commitment, and instructional performance. The principal's ability to integrate institutional goals with Islamic values was found to create a supportive school climate that encourages responsibility and innovation among teachers. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated perspective linking leadership practices, teacher motivation, and professional performance in Islamic vocational education. These results contribute to educational leadership theory and provide practical insights for school leaders seeking to enhance teacher professionalism and learning quality in faith-based vocational schools.

Keywords: Islamic Education, School Leadership, Teacher Motivation, Vocational Schools



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INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership has been identified as a fundamental determinant of teacher motivation and professional performance (Andriadi & Sulistiyo, 2024). This means that leadership not only regulates administrative processes but also shapes teachers' psychological engagement with their work. Leadership practices influence school climate and support the implementation of effective instructional strategies (Wahyudi, Fitria, & Rohana, 2024). A positive climate helps teachers feel valued and supported in carrying out their professional roles. Despite this well-established influence, empirical studies on leadership in Islamic vocational schools remain limited (Basyari & Maftuchan, 2023). This gap is important because these schools operate within a dual framework of professional standards and religious values. Leaders in such institutions are required to manage academic quality while also maintaining ethical and spiritual orientations. These complex expectations make leadership practices in Islamic vocational schools fundamentally different from those in general education settings (Kotimah & Rindaningsih, 2025).

The demand for high-quality vocational education continues to increase in Indonesia (Cahyono & Arifianto, 2024). Schools are now expected to produce graduates who are both work-ready and morally responsible. Many Islamic vocational schools still struggle with teacher motivation and professional alignment (Solekha, Sumarno, & Rasiman, 2025). These difficulties affect how teachers design lessons, manage classrooms, and guide students' character development. Participative and value-based leadership has been linked to stronger teacher commitment and job satisfaction (Pratama & Syahputra, 2023). Such leadership creates a sense of shared purpose between school leaders and teachers (Zebua et al., 2025). When teachers feel involved in decision-making, they are more likely to demonstrate responsibility and innovation in their work (Beliani, Arafat, & Nugroho, 2025). This makes leadership a central factor in improving the quality of teaching and learning in Islamic vocational schools (Marlianti, Widayatsih, & Fahmi, 2023).

To clarify the conceptual relationship between leadership practices, teacher motivation, professional performance, and the integration of Islamic values in vocational education, this study presents a conceptual framework in the form of an Educational Leadership Pyramid (Figure 1). This framework synthesizes key theoretical insights and empirical findings from previous studies, emphasizing leadership as the foundational factor that shapes school climate, teacher engagement, and instructional quality. The figure is intended to provide a visual representation of how leadership functions as a driving force that progressively influences teachers' motivation and professional performance within the context of Islamic vocational schools.

At the base of the pyramid are leadership practices, which represent the strategic and relational roles of school principals in shaping organizational culture, instructional direction, and school climate, all of which are central to effective educational leadership (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). These leadership practices directly influence teacher motivation, shown at the second level of the pyramid, where collaborative decision-making, professional trust, and supportive leadership enhance teachers' engagement and commitment to their professional roles (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Increased teacher motivation subsequently contributes to improved professional performance, reflected in teachers' instructional quality, classroom management, and sustained professional growth, as motivation is a key predictor of effective teaching behavior (OECD, 2021). At the top of the pyramid is faith-based integration, which signifies the alignment of educational goals with Islamic ethical and spiritual values. This level represents the highest outcome of leadership in Islamic vocational schools, where professional performance is guided by moral purpose and religious responsibility (Shah, 2022). Overall, the figure demonstrates that leadership in Islamic vocational schools operates as a cumulative and value-driven process, in which effective leadership practices foster motivated teachers and professional excellence grounded in faith-based educational principles.

Islamic Education teachers carry both academic and spiritual responsibilities (Basyari & Maftuchan, 2023). Their work extends beyond delivering subject content to guiding students' moral and ethical development. This dual role requires leadership that addresses both professional and faith-based needs (Kotimah & Rindaningsih, 2025). Without appropriate support, teachers may experience tension between instructional demands and moral expectations. Supportive leadership has been shown to enhance intrinsic motivation and professional engagement (Hasinah, Putra, & Suherman, 2024). This form of leadership helps teachers feel that their work is meaningful and valued within the school community. When teachers perceive leadership as supportive, they are more likely to demonstrate commitment and consistency in their teaching practices (Yusuf & Nuraini, 2023).

Vocational schools often face limited professional development opportunities and unclear role expectations (Cahyono & Arifianto, 2024). These conditions can reduce teachers' capacity to improve their instructional skills and professional competence. Ineffective leadership can worsen these problems by failing to provide direction and constructive feedback (Ramadhan & Hidayat, 2024). As a result, teachers may feel uncertain about their responsibilities and performance standards. Leadership that does not respond to teachers' needs can weaken organizational performance (Sulistyo, 2024). This situation highlights the importance of leadership in creating a structured and supportive environment for professional growth.

In Islamic vocational schools, weak leadership can disrupt the integration of religious values into daily teaching practices (Basyari & Maftuchan, 2023). This disconnect may reduce teachers' sense of purpose and professional identity. Value-based leadership has been found to strengthen teacher engagement and institutional cohesion (Zebua et al., 2025). Such leadership promotes a shared understanding between school goals and religious commitments. Moral-centered leadership is especially important in faith-based educational environments (Kotimah & Rindaningsih, 2025). It enables teachers to view their work not only as a profession but also as a form of service to their faith and community.

Qualitative research allows deeper understanding of how leadership is experienced by teachers (Sadri, 2023). This approach focuses on meanings, perceptions, and daily practices within school life. Case studies are effective for examining leadership in specific institutional contexts (Systematic literature review, 2024). They enable researchers to capture real interactions between leaders and teachers in natural settings. Qualitative methods also help explain motivational and professional dynamics in schools (Ulfa Tiara, Badawi Saluy, & Bari, 2023). This approach provides rich data that cannot be obtained through purely quantitative methods. For this reason, qualitative inquiry is well suited to explore leadership in Islamic vocational education.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how school leadership practices influence the motivation and professional performance of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in an Islamic vocational school in Indonesia. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach to understand leadership as a lived and contextualized practice. Through this approach, the research seeks to reveal how leadership shapes teachers' daily work, motivation, and professional behavior. The findings are expected to extend educational leadership theory by incorporating faith-based vocational contexts. They are also expected to provide practical guidance for school leaders seeking to improve teacher professionalism and learning quality.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach within an interpretive paradigm to explore school leadership practices and their effects on teacher motivation and performance. This approach was selected because leadership and motivation are socially constructed phenomena that can only be fully understood through the meanings, experiences, and

interactions of school actors in their natural settings. By using a qualitative design, the researcher was able to capture how leadership is practiced, perceived, and experienced by teachers and school leaders in everyday educational activities (Hikmah & Putra, 2022). The research was designed as a case study conducted in a vocational secondary school during an active academic year. A case study design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth and holistic examination of leadership practices within a real institutional context. This design makes it possible to understand how leadership strategies, organizational culture, and professional relationships interact to shape teachers' motivation and performance over time (Kurniasari et al., 2025).

Research Target/Subject

The research subjects consisted of the school principal, Islamic Education (PAI) teachers, and supporting informants such as other teachers and students. These participants were selected because they are directly involved in leadership processes, teaching practices, and learning environments, and therefore possess rich information about how leadership influences motivation and professional performance in schools (Zulfiter et al., 2023). Participants were selected using purposive sampling to identify individuals who had the most relevant experiences with leadership and teaching, followed by snowball sampling to reach additional informants who could provide deeper and more varied perspectives. This strategy ensured that the data were drawn from participants who were able to provide detailed, accurate, and meaningful accounts of leadership practices and their impacts (Rina Hasna & Agustina, 2025).

Research Procedure

The research procedures involved several interrelated stages, beginning with preliminary observation to understand the school environment, leadership structure, and teacher interactions. This was followed by systematic data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation in order to capture both formal leadership practices and informal day-to-day interactions between school leaders and teachers (Pitdianti et al., 2024). These procedures were implemented in a cyclical and iterative manner, meaning that early findings informed subsequent data collection and deeper exploration of emerging issues. This iterative process allowed the researcher to refine interpretations, verify information through multiple sources, and develop a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership shapes teacher motivation and performance (Hikmah & Putra, 2022).

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. These methods were chosen because they allow the researcher to examine leadership practices from multiple angles, combining what people do, what they say, and what is formally recorded in institutional documents. Using multiple techniques also strengthened the credibility and depth of the data collected (Zulfiter et al., 2023). Observation focused on leadership behaviors and classroom activities, interviews explored the perspectives of principals and teachers, and documentation provided official evidence of policies, supervision, and performance records. The integration of these data sources enabled the researcher to cross-check findings and develop a more accurate and comprehensive picture of leadership and teacher performance (Wahyudi et al., 2024).

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis followed an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, the researcher selected and organized relevant information, while data display involved arranging the data into meaningful categories, tables, and narratives to reveal patterns and relationships between leadership and teacher performance (Hikmah & Putra, 2022). Through continuous interpretation and verification, conclusions were

drawn by comparing data across sources and refining emerging themes. This process ensured that the final findings were grounded in empirical evidence and accurately reflected how school leadership influences teacher motivation and professional performance (Fikri, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that leadership practices at SMK Muhammadiyah Berau play a decisive role in shaping teacher motivation and professional performance, particularly among Islamic Education (PAI) teachers. Data from interviews, observations, and documentation reveal that the principal applies a visionary, participative, and value-based leadership approach. Leadership is not exercised through authority alone but through communication, integrity, and collaboration, which strengthens teachers' trust and engagement. Teachers reported that the principal regularly communicates school goals through meetings, written policies, and daily interactions, ensuring that all staff understand the direction of the institution. This clarity of direction reduces uncertainty and helps teachers align their work with school priorities. Such leadership practices support the view that effective school leadership is built on relational trust and shared vision rather than hierarchical control (Hallinger, 2021).

Table 1. Erves as an Analytical Framework Derived from Empirical and Theoretical Insights On Visionary Leadership's Cascading Effects.

Stage	Key Components	Description	Expected Outcomes
Leadership Practices	Visionary, Participatory, Value-Based (Islamic principles: justice, trust, deliberation)	Principals foster a conducive school climate through ethical guidance, stakeholder involvement, and shared vision aligned with Qur'anic values. Leadership shapes daily experiences via motivation, professional development, and supportive policies for PAI teachers.	Positive work environment and teacher alignment with institutional goals.
Influence on Work Experiences	Conducive Climate Building	Empowered teachers build internal drive through value congruence, autonomy, and recognition.	Enhanced job satisfaction and sense of purpose.
Teacher Motivation	Intrinsic Motivation Development	Motivated teachers improve teaching quality, innovation, and student outcomes in Islamic vocational context.	Higher engagement, commitment, and self-efficacy.
Professional Performance	Professionalism Enhancement		Elevated performance metrics, better student results, and school excellence.

To facilitate understanding of the relationship between school leadership practices, teacher motivation, and professional performance in the context of Islamic vocational high schools, this study presents a conceptual model. This model is designed based on empirical findings and theoretical studies that emphasize the role of visionary, participatory, and value-based leadership in creating a conducive school climate. This visualization serves as an analytical framework that illustrates the step-by-step process of how principal leadership practices influence the work experiences of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, particularly in building intrinsic motivation and professionalism. Thus, the following figure is

not only illustrative but also represents a conceptual synthesis of the results of the qualitative research conducted.

Figure 2 depicts a continuous process that begins with the inquiry stage, where school leadership attempts to understand teachers' needs, aspirations, and challenges through reflective communication and open dialogue. This stage evolves into participatory leadership practices, where teachers are actively involved in school decision-making and planning. This participatory leadership creates a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, which in turn strengthens teacher motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation and professional commitment among Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers. The motivation that grows within a supportive, Islamic-values-based leadership climate ultimately leads to improved performance, reflected in increased work discipline, learning quality, pedagogical innovation, and the integration of Islamic values into educational practices. Thus, this figure emphasizes the dynamic relationship between leadership practices, teacher motivation, and professional performance in the context of Islamic vocational schools.

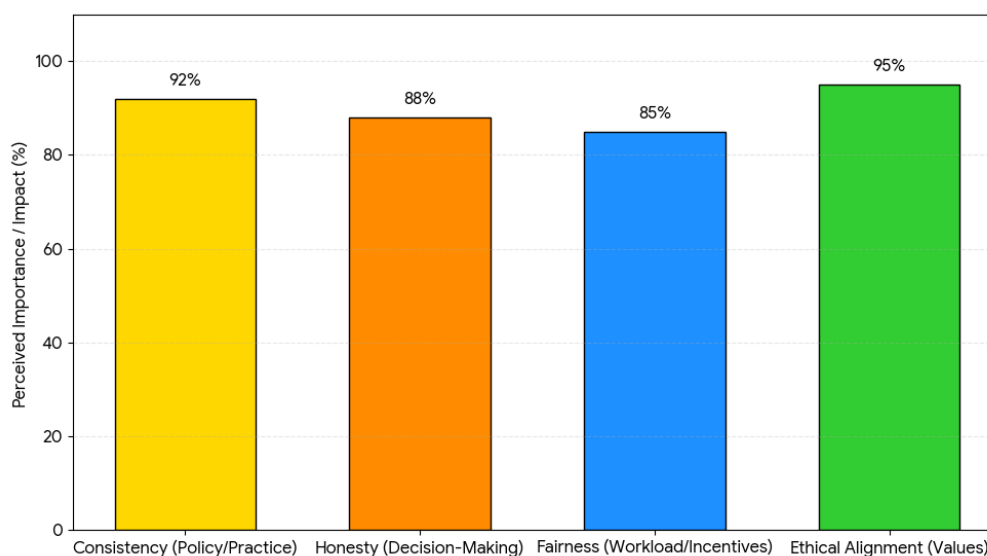


Figure 1. Impact of Integrity Dimensions on School Leadership Perception

Integrity was identified as the most important leadership quality. The principal demonstrated consistency between policy and practice, honesty in decision-making, and fairness in managing teachers, particularly in matters related to workload, incentives, and professional opportunities. Teachers perceived that leadership decisions were not influenced by personal interests but were based on collective benefit and institutional values. This perception increased their willingness to follow policies and support school programs. Ethical leadership has been shown to increase organizational trust and teacher commitment, which are essential for sustaining school performance (Eyal, 2021). In the Islamic vocational school context, integrity also has religious meaning, reinforcing teachers' belief that leadership aligns with moral and spiritual values, not merely administrative rules.

Participative leadership was clearly reflected in decision-making at SMK Muhammadiyah Berau. Teachers were actively involved in curriculum planning, vocational programs, and professional development activities, allowing them to contribute their expertise and practical experience. When conflicts occurred, the principal encouraged discussion and collective problem-solving rather than unilateral decisions. This approach created a sense of shared ownership over school policies and reduced interpersonal tension among staff. Recent research confirms that participative leadership enhances teacher involvement and organizational learning in schools (Tian, 2020). As a result, teachers felt more responsible for school outcomes and more committed to improving educational quality.

Leadership also strongly influenced teacher motivation. Teachers demonstrated both intrinsic motivation, such as commitment to teaching, religious responsibility, and desire for self-development, and extrinsic motivation, including financial incentives, recognition, and welfare support. The principal strengthened motivation by providing additional allowances, holiday bonuses, and opportunities for training and industrial internships. These incentives made teachers feel that their efforts were valued by the institution. Self-determination theory explains that motivation becomes stronger when leaders support autonomy, competence, and fairness in the workplace (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In this school, motivational support helped teachers remain enthusiastic even when facing heavy workloads and institutional challenges.

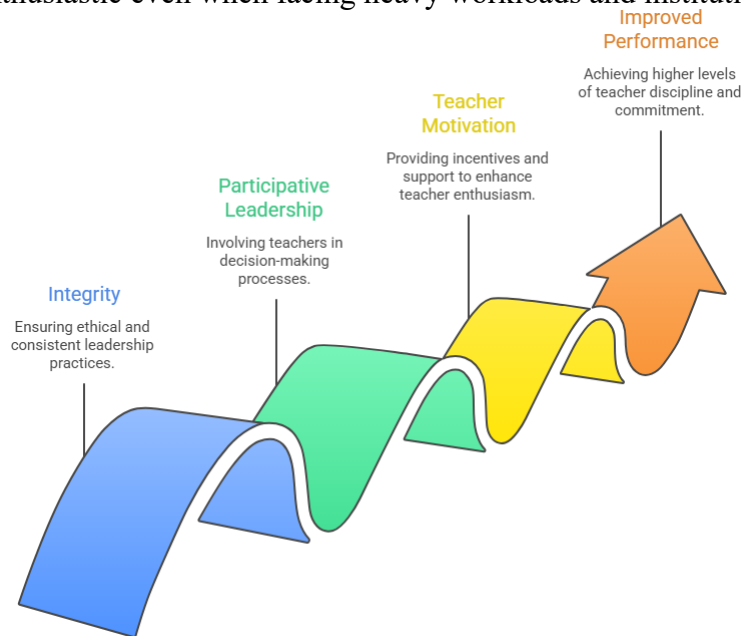


Figure 2. Achieving School Performance

High motivation was closely associated with improved teacher performance. Motivated teachers showed higher levels of discipline, punctuality, and commitment to classroom preparation. PAI teachers were particularly active in developing learning materials, participating in curriculum training, and integrating moral education into daily instruction. They also demonstrated greater willingness to adopt new teaching strategies. Empirical evidence shows that motivated teachers are more engaged in teaching and more willing to improve their professional practices (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021). In SMK Muhammadiyah Berau, performance was not only measured by academic outcomes but also by consistency, responsibility, and dedication to student character development.

Leadership also shaped the organizational climate of the school by establishing norms of trust, openness, and shared responsibility. Through transparent communication, ethical conduct, and consistent supervisory support, the principal fostered a working environment that encouraged collaboration and mutual respect among teachers (Louis & Murphy, 2021). In such an environment, teachers felt psychologically safe to share instructional challenges, seek professional guidance, and propose innovative teaching ideas without fear of negative judgment. This sense of psychological safety is essential in reducing work-related stress and strengthening collegial relationships within schools (Edmondson & Lei, 2021). A supportive and collaborative school climate has been empirically shown to mediate the relationship between leadership practices and teacher performance by enhancing cooperation, trust, and collective efficacy (Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2022). In the context of SMK Muhammadiyah Berau, this positive organizational climate was further reinforced by shared Islamic values that emphasized respect (*ta'zim*), mutual care (*ukhuwah*), and collective responsibility (*amanah*), which strengthened teachers' emotional attachment to the school community.

The faith-based vocational context provides a distinctive contribution to this study by highlighting the integration of leadership practices with Islamic moral values. Leadership at SMK Muhammadiyah Berau aligned institutional goals with religious principles, enabling teachers to perceive their professional roles as both pedagogical duties and spiritual responsibilities. This integration allowed teachers to frame teaching not merely as paid employment, but as a form of worship (*ibadah*) and social service (*khidmah*), which enhanced their sense of purpose and moral commitment (Ismail, Don, & Husin, 2021). Such meaning-making processes have been shown to increase teachers' resilience and persistence when facing professional challenges (Day & Gu, 2020). Value-based and moral-centered leadership has also been found to strengthen intrinsic motivation and long-term organizational commitment, particularly in faith-based educational settings (Shah & Barton, 2023). In this context, moral leadership functioned as a powerful driver of sustainable teacher professionalism, ensuring that high performance was consistently guided by ethical integrity and spiritual accountability.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that leadership, motivation, and teacher performance operate as an integrated system. Ethical and participative leadership builds trust, clarity, and fairness, which strengthens teacher motivation. Motivated teachers, in turn, demonstrate higher levels of discipline, engagement, and instructional quality. This interaction creates a reinforcing cycle that supports continuous school improvement. Contemporary leadership theory emphasizes that sustainable educational quality depends on the interaction between leadership, motivation, and organizational climate (Hallinger, 2021). The experience of SMK Muhammadiyah Berau confirms that this model is highly relevant in Islamic vocational education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that school leadership plays a decisive role in shaping teacher motivation and professional performance in Islamic vocational education. The case of SMK Muhammadiyah Berau shows that visionary, participative, and value-based leadership creates a school climate characterized by trust, clarity, and collaboration. When leadership is grounded in integrity, fairness, and open communication, teachers feel respected and supported, which strengthens their commitment to institutional goals. The findings also reveal that teacher motivation is influenced by a balanced combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Islamic Education teachers were motivated not only by financial incentives and recognition but also by moral responsibility, professional growth, and religious values. This combination made teachers more resilient, disciplined, and willing to improve their instructional practices. As a result, motivation became a key mechanism through which leadership translated into professional performance.

Furthermore, the study highlights that teacher performance in Islamic vocational schools is not limited to academic outcomes, but also includes consistency, dedication, and character education. Leadership that integrates organizational goals with Islamic values encourages teachers to view their work as both a professional duty and a form of spiritual service. This dual orientation strengthens long-term commitment and sustainability of performance. Overall, the study contributes to educational leadership theory by showing how ethical and participative leadership, when combined with faith-based values, can effectively enhance teacher motivation and professional performance. Practically, the findings suggest that school leaders in Islamic vocational schools should prioritize integrity, teacher involvement, and motivational support in order to improve educational quality and institutional effectiveness.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used ChatGPT to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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