

Principal Leadership Strategies for Enhancing Teacher Motivation in Rural Elementary Education: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: This study examines principal leadership strategies for enhancing teacher motivation in a rural elementary school setting, specifically addressing the contextual challenges of resource-limited environments. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research was conducted at SDN 6 Empat Petulai Dangku, Muara Enim Regency, South Sumatra. Participants included the principal, supervisor, teachers, students, committee representatives, and administrative staff, selected via purposive sampling. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation, then analyzed using data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing, with trustworthiness ensured through source and technique triangulation. Findings reveal that the principal strengthened teacher motivation through participatory planning, academic supervision, professional development, appreciation, discipline coaching, and supportive communication. However, major obstacles persisted, including limited facilities, uneven teacher discipline, low digital competence, heavy administrative loads, and scarce external support. This study offers a contextualized leadership model tailored to rural Indonesian elementary schools, integrating instructional, democratic, and emotional dimensions rarely combined in prior research. The results underscore the need for district policymakers to provide targeted infrastructure, digital training, and workload relief to complement school-level leadership efforts. This research contributes empirical evidence that effective rural principalship demands a balanced synthesis of instructional guidance, participative decision-making, emotional support, and strategic resource optimization to sustain teacher motivation and elevate learning quality despite geographical and infrastructural constraints.

Keywords: Academic Supervision, Educational Management, Principal Leadership, Rural Elementary School, Teacher Motivation

A. Introduction

Teacher motivation is one of the most important conditions for effective schooling because motivated teachers tend to plan learning more carefully, manage classrooms more creatively, participate in professional development, and maintain stronger commitment to student learning (Lyu, 2025). In elementary education, this issue

becomes even more crucial because teachers work directly with students at a foundational stage of literacy, numeracy, character formation, and social development (Al-qoyyim et al., 2024; Pearl et al., 2026). Motivation is not merely a personal attribute. It is shaped by leadership, organizational climate, professional recognition, workload, learning facilities, and opportunities for development (Id & Id, 2025). Therefore, the quality of principal leadership is closely linked to the motivational condition of teachers and to the learning environment experienced by students (Even & Bendavid-hadar, 2025; Ozdogru et al., 2025).

In educational management, the principal is not only an administrator who manages documents and facilities (Abdullah et al., 2026). The principal is expected to act as an instructional leader, supervisor, motivator, facilitator, and agent of school improvement. Effective principals develop a shared vision, distribute tasks according to teacher competence, involve teachers in school decisions, monitor the quality of instruction, and provide constructive feedback (Hua et al., 2024). These roles are consistent with contemporary perspectives on principal leadership which emphasize collaboration, professional learning, and continuous improvement rather than command-and-control leadership (Lushaj & Shatri, 2026). In the context of Indonesian schools, this leadership responsibility becomes more demanding because principals must also support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, digital learning platforms, school-based management, and accountability demands from various stakeholders (Harjanti et al., 2026).

Previous studies have generally shown that principal leadership has a positive relationship with teacher motivation and teacher performance (Usman & Morris, 2025). Leadership practices that are participatory, communicative, and supportive can increase teachers' sense of ownership, professional confidence, and willingness to improve learning. Academic supervision can also strengthen teachers' pedagogical competence when it is conducted as collegial coaching rather than as fault-finding inspection. Likewise, recognition, reward, and opportunities for professional development can increase teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. However, many existing studies still focus on urban schools, secondary education, or quantitative relationships between leadership variables and teacher performance. Less attention has been given to how leadership strategies are practiced in rural elementary schools where school resources, infrastructure, internet access, and teacher professional learning opportunities are often limited (Jemsy et al., 2026).

SDN 6 Empat Petulai Dangku provides a relevant context for examining this issue. The school is located in Gunung Raja Village, Empat Petulai Dangku District, Muara Enim Regency, South Sumatra, and operates as a public elementary school with accreditation B. Like many rural schools, the school faces challenges related to facilities, access to learning media, digital competence, and teacher workload. The thesis data show that some teachers had not fully optimized lesson planning, varied learning methods, and digital media. At the same time, the school also had several

strengths, including a functioning teacher learning community, school committee support, and a principal who attempted to build communication and professional coaching. This combination of constraints and local strengths makes the school an important case for understanding leadership strategies in resource-limited settings (Murphy et al., 2026).

The novelty of this study lies in its contextual explanation of principal leadership strategies for increasing teacher motivation in a rural elementary school. Instead of treating motivation as an abstract psychological variable, this article connects teacher motivation to daily school practices: planning teaching modules, joining teacher working groups, completing administrative tasks, using available learning media, receiving feedback after supervision, and participating in school meetings. The article also corrects and sharpens the thesis narrative by consistently using the concept of teacher motivation, while still recognizing that motivation is often reflected in teacher performance. Therefore, the central research question is: How does the principal implement leadership strategies to improve teacher motivation at SDN 6 Empat Petulai Dangku, and what obstacles and solutions emerge from this process?

Based on the research focus and the theoretical discussion, this study developed a conceptual framework to explain how principal leadership strategies contribute to enhancing teacher motivation in rural elementary education. The framework illustrates that principal leadership strategies are implemented through participatory planning, academic supervision, professional development, motivation and appreciation, supportive communication, and discipline coaching. These strategies are expected to strengthen teacher motivation and support the improvement of learning quality. The conceptual framework of this study is presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Principal Leadership Strategies in Enhancing Teacher Motivation

B. Methods

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach. The qualitative design was selected because the research focused on understanding leadership practices, teacher

motivation, school context, and the meanings constructed by school members. Rather than measuring the effect of leadership statistically, the study sought to describe how leadership strategies were planned, implemented, supervised, and experienced by the principal, teachers, and supporting stakeholders (Ukwigize et al., 2026). The research site was SDN 6 Empat Petulai Dangku, located in Gunung Raja Village, Empat Petulai Dangku District, Muara Enim Regency, South Sumatra. The research was conducted from December 2025 to March 2026, covering preparation, instrument development, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. The school was selected because it represents a rural elementary school with leadership challenges related to facilities, teacher discipline, teacher motivation, professional development, and technology use (Kormos, 2021). Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The study involved the school principal as the key informant, one school supervisor as an external evaluator, four teachers as the main recipients of leadership strategies, five students as supporting informants, one school committee member as a community representative, and one administrative staff member as a source of information about school coordination and administrative support. The selection of participants was not based on large sample size, but on the depth and relevance of information for the research focus (Lim, 2025).

Table 1. Research Participants

Participant group	Number	Reason for inclusion
Principal	1	Key informant who designed and implemented leadership strategies.
School supervisor	1	External perspective on principal leadership, supervision, and teacher development.
Teachers	4	Main recipients of leadership strategies and direct sources of teacher motivation data.
Students	5	Supporting informants who reflected the classroom impact of teacher motivation.
School committee member	1	Community stakeholder who observed school collaboration and support.
Administrative staff	1	Supporting informant on coordination, administration, and facility management.

Data were collected through three techniques. First, interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, school supervisor, students, school committee member, and administrative staff. The interview questions explored leadership style, decision making, supervision, professional development, teacher motivation, communication, facilities, and obstacles (Meng, 2022). Second, observation was used to examine school activities, teacher discipline, supervision practices, learning activities, and the use of facilities. Third, documentation was used to review school profile data, teacher data, teaching administration, supervision documents, and other school records. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data reduction was conducted by selecting information relevant to the research focus: planning, supervision, obstacles, and solutions. Data display was conducted through

thematic matrices and narrative descriptions. Conclusion drawing was conducted gradually by comparing interview, observation, and documentation evidence (Kowalski et al., 2024). The trustworthiness of the data was strengthened through source triangulation and technique triangulation. Source triangulation compared information from the principal, teachers, supervisor, students, committee member, and administrative staff. Technique triangulation compared interview data with observation and documentation.

C. Results and Discussion

The findings are organized into four themes aligned with the research focus: leadership planning, leadership supervision, obstacles in improving teacher motivation, and leadership solutions. Overall, the findings indicate that teacher motivation at SDN 6 Empat Petulai Dangku was strengthened when the principal combined structured planning with supportive supervision, recognition, professional development, and collegial communication. Motivation was not built through one single program, but through a series of daily leadership practices that made teachers feel guided, observed, appreciated, and involved in school improvement (Alzouebi et al., 2025).

Leadership planning for teacher motivation

The first strategy was participatory planning. The principal prepared school programs by involving teachers in meetings, distributing tasks according to teacher competence, and encouraging teachers to participate in professional development activities (Mthanti & Msiza, 2023). The planning strategy was visible in school work programs, teacher task division, learning community activities, and participation in the Teacher Working Group (Kelompok Kerja Guru/KKG). Teachers were encouraged to use training results and share them with colleagues through school-based discussion. This practice supported teacher motivation because teachers were not treated merely as implementers of instructions, but as professional actors who contributed to school programs (Sullanmaa et al., 2024).

The planning strategy also addressed classroom learning. Teachers were directed to prepare teaching modules, learning media, assessment plans, and lesson administration before teaching. The principal emphasized that learning objectives, materials, methods, and evaluation must be aligned. This planning support became motivational because it helped teachers understand expectations and reduced uncertainty in teaching. However, the data also showed that some teachers still relied on copying teaching plans from the internet or submitted incomplete documents. This indicates that planning alone was not sufficient. It had to be followed by supervision, feedback, and professional assistance (Burgess et al., 2020). Participatory planning also had a democratic dimension. Teachers were involved in decision making through meetings and informal communication. The principal encouraged teachers to express

ideas and concerns, particularly regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the use of digital platforms (Syofyan et al., 2024). This is important because curriculum change often creates anxiety among teachers, especially when they have limited access to technology and training. By involving teachers in planning, the principal reduced resistance and built a sense of shared responsibility.

Academic supervision as professional support

The second strategy was academic supervision. The principal monitored teacher work through classroom visits, observation of teaching, review of learning administration, and feedback sessions. Classroom supervision was generally conducted at least once each semester, while administrative monitoring was conducted more regularly. The school used Google Drive as a practical tool for collecting and checking teacher administration. This simple technology-based monitoring helped the principal follow teacher progress and encouraged teachers to submit documents on time (Ozdogru et al., 2025). The supervision process was perceived more as guidance than as judgment. Before classroom observation, teachers received direction on teaching modules, media, and learning materials. After observation, the principal provided suggestions for improvement. This approach was important because supervision that is too punitive can reduce motivation, while supervision that is developmental can increase teacher confidence (Ahmed et al., 2025). In this study, teachers reported that guidance from the principal helped them prepare learning devices and improve classroom practices. Supervision also included informal monitoring of discipline and school climate. The principal gave direction during ceremonies, communicated politely with teachers, greeted teachers and parents, and maintained a friendly relationship with school members. These actions may appear simple, but in a small rural school they contribute to a supportive organizational climate. A principal who is visible, approachable, and consistent can strengthen teacher motivation by making teachers feel accompanied in their work (Keravnos & Symeou, 2024).

Motivation, appreciation, and teacher work climate

The third strategy was direct motivation and appreciation. The principal motivated teachers through praise, constructive suggestions, moral support, and public appreciation. Appreciation was given verbally during school activities and meetings, and in some cases through certificates or small rewards, especially during events such as Teachers' Day. This strategy addressed teachers' need for recognition. Teachers who completed tasks on time or showed dedication received acknowledgement from the principal (Duraku & Hoxha, 2021). Such appreciation encouraged teachers to maintain positive work habits. The principal also attempted to create a comfortable and harmonious work environment. Teachers were encouraged to support one another, share teaching ideas, and discuss problems in the school learning community. The findings suggest that collegial relations became an important motivational resource. In rural schools where facilities are limited, social support

among teachers can partly compensate for material limitations. Teacher motivation was visible in three areas: planning learning activities, implementing learning activities, and evaluating learning outcomes (Lazarides et al., 2025). Teachers generally prepared learning modules and conducted classroom activities in a structured sequence, including opening activities, core activities, and closing activities. They also implemented written, oral, practical, and project-based assessments. Nevertheless, motivation was not evenly strong. Some teachers still used lecture-dominant methods and experienced difficulty using learning media because the school had limited LCD/projector facilities. This shows that teacher motivation interacts with both individual readiness and school resources (Mcneill & Robertson, 2025).

Obstacles in improving teacher motivation

The study identified several obstacles. First, facilities and infrastructure were limited. Learning media, digital tools, and supporting facilities were not sufficient to allow all teachers to implement varied and technology-based learning at the same time. The limited number of LCD/projectors made it difficult for teachers to use video or digital learning materials regularly. Second, the discipline of some teachers had not been fully optimal. Long travel distances, personal reasons, and administrative demands sometimes affected punctuality and task completion (Tiggelaar et al., 2024). Third, some teachers had limited information technology competence. This created difficulty in using digital media, online learning resources, and the Platform Merdeka Mengajar. The challenge was more visible among teachers who were less familiar with technology. Fourth, teacher awareness of continuous professional development was uneven. Some teachers were active in training and KKG activities, while others were less enthusiastic because of workload, confidence, or limited motivation. Fifth, administrative workload was high (X. Zhang et al., 2021). Teachers had to prepare teaching documents, assessment reports, and other administrative files, which sometimes reduced their time and energy for designing creative learning. The obstacles were interrelated. Limited facilities reduced teachers' ability to innovate. Limited digital competence made technology integration difficult. Heavy administrative tasks reduced time for professional learning. Uneven discipline affected the rhythm of school activities. Therefore, the principal's leadership strategy needed to address not only motivational messages, but also structural conditions that influence motivation (Mugwaze & Smith, 2024).

Leadership solutions implemented by the principal

The principal implemented several solutions. The first solution was optimizing existing facilities (Fern et al., 2024). Because facilities were limited, teachers used learning media alternately and coordinated the use of LCD/projector equipment according to need. This solution did not remove the limitation, but it prevented the limitation from completely blocking learning innovation. The second solution was

discipline coaching. The principal used personal communication, verbal warnings, written reminders when needed, and coordination with the school supervisor or education office for repeated violations. The approach was generally persuasive and familial, aiming to correct behavior without damaging relationships (Orji, 2021).

The third solution was professional development. Teachers were encouraged to join seminars, workshops, online training, KKG meetings, and school-based learning community activities. Teachers who had attended training were asked to share knowledge with colleagues. The fourth solution was strengthening digital competence. The principal encouraged teachers to learn basic information technology, use Google Drive for administration, and access digital learning resources. The fifth solution was building a positive work climate (Qu & Mydin, 2026). The principal supported teachers emotionally, attempted to distribute tasks proportionally, and maintained open communication to reduce work stress. These solutions show that principal leadership in rural schools must be adaptive. The principal cannot rely only on formal programs or external training because rural schools often face budget and access limitations (W. Zhang, 2025). Instead, the principal must combine formal supervision, local collaboration, peer learning, and resource optimization. This adaptive strategy is the main practical contribution of the study.

Table 2. Summary of Findings

Theme	Main evidence	Interpretation for teacher motivation
Leadership planning	School program planning, task division, teacher involvement in meetings, KKG and training opportunities.	Teachers gained clearer direction and stronger ownership of school programs.
Academic supervision	Classroom visits, review of teaching modules, administrative monitoring through Google Drive, feedback sessions.	Teachers received guidance and became more disciplined in preparing teaching documents.
Motivation and appreciation	Praise, moral support, certificates, public appreciation, harmonious communication.	Teachers felt recognized and more willing to complete responsibilities.
Professional development	Seminars, workshops, school learning community, KKG participation, peer sharing.	Teachers had opportunities to improve competence and share good practices.
Obstacles	Limited facilities, uneven discipline, weak digital competence, high administrative workload, limited external support.	Teacher motivation was influenced by both psychological and structural conditions.
Solutions	Facility optimization, discipline coaching, IT mentoring, collaborative work, emotional support, proportional task division.	Leadership became adaptive and context-sensitive for a rural school setting.

Discussion

The findings show that teacher motivation improved when the principal's leadership combined three dimensions: instructional, participatory, and motivational leadership.

Instructional leadership appeared through classroom supervision, review of teaching documents, feedback, and attention to learning quality. Participatory leadership appeared through teacher involvement in planning, decision making, and learning community activities (Nadeem, 2024). Motivational leadership appeared through praise, appreciation, moral encouragement, and efforts to build a positive school climate. These dimensions should not be separated because teacher motivation in a rural school is shaped by the interaction of professional guidance, emotional support, and practical resources (Wang et al., 2021).

The finding on participatory planning supports the view that school improvement requires teacher involvement. When teachers are included in planning, they are more likely to understand program goals and feel responsible for implementation (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2023). This is particularly important in the implementation of new curriculum demands. In the case of SDN 6 Empat Petulai Dangku, teacher participation helped reduce resistance and allowed the principal to understand teachers' needs. However, the study also shows that participation must be supported by follow-up mechanisms. Some teachers still needed assistance in preparing teaching modules and using varied learning methods. Therefore, planning must be connected to supervision and professional learning.

The finding on supervision reinforces the idea that academic supervision should function as professional assistance. In this study, supervision was not limited to administrative inspection. The principal conducted classroom visits, checked teaching modules, and provided feedback (Ozdogru et al., 2025). This approach is consistent with developmental supervision, which emphasizes teacher growth. Teachers were more likely to accept supervision when it was delivered politely, constructively, and with practical suggestions. This confirms that the emotional tone of supervision matters. A principal who supervises without empathy may create fear, whereas a principal who supervises with guidance can increase motivation (Berkovich, 2025).

The use of Google Drive for collecting teacher administration is a small but important practice. In a school with limited resources, simple digital tools can improve monitoring and discipline. However, this strategy also revealed a digital competence gap among teachers. Some teachers were not fully confident in using technology. This finding is relevant to the broader challenge of digital transformation in education (Ruloff et al., 2025). Technology-based monitoring and learning platforms can support teacher development only when teachers receive adequate assistance. Without mentoring, technology may become an additional burden rather than a motivational resource. The finding on appreciation is also important. Teachers at SDN 6 Empat Petulai Dangku were motivated not only by formal training, but also by recognition, praise, and a supportive work environment. This aligns with motivation theories that emphasize recognition and achievement as motivators. In many rural schools, material rewards may be limited, but non-material appreciation can still strengthen teacher commitment. Nevertheless, appreciation should be fair, transparent, and

connected to clear performance indicators. If appreciation is perceived as informal favoritism, it may create conflict. Therefore, principals need to develop clear criteria for recognizing teacher effort and achievement (Gladys et al., 2025).

The obstacles found in this study show that teacher motivation cannot be explained only by individual willingness. Some teachers may appear less motivated because they face structural constraints: limited media, long travel distance, high administrative workload, limited internet access, and insufficient technology skills. This means that leadership strategies must move beyond motivational speeches. Principals need to remove barriers, simplify work procedures where possible, coordinate support from the school committee, and advocate for facilities from education authorities. Teacher motivation becomes stronger when teachers experience that the school system supports their work (Eusebio et al., 2025). This study also contributes to the discussion of rural school leadership. In rural schools, leadership effectiveness depends on the principal's ability to use local resources. The principal at SDN 6 Empat Petulai Dangku optimized existing facilities, used school learning communities, involved parents and the committee, and encouraged teachers to join accessible professional development. These strategies show that rural leadership is not necessarily weak because of limited resources (Parashar et al., 2024). It can be strong when the principal is adaptive, communicative, and capable of transforming constraints into collaborative action.

Compared from previous studies that emphasize the statistical influence of leadership on teacher motivation, this study provides a practice-based explanation of how leadership operates in daily school life (Windlinger et al., 2025). The findings suggest that teacher motivation is built through repeated micro-practices: greeting teachers, giving feedback, checking documents, inviting teachers to meetings, appreciating small achievements, solving facility conflicts, and encouraging peer learning. These micro-practices accumulate into organizational trust. Thus, the main implication is that principal leadership for teacher motivation should be continuous, relational, and embedded in everyday school routines. Different from several previous studies that emphasize digital leadership, formal professional development, or large-scale school programs as the main drivers of teacher motivation, this study shows that teacher motivation in a rural elementary school was shaped more strongly by daily leadership practices, supportive communication, and practical resource management. In this context, digital tools and professional training were important, but their effects were limited by teachers' digital competence, facility constraints, internet access, and administrative workload. Therefore, the findings suggest that leadership strategies in rural schools cannot simply replicate models from urban or well-resourced schools. Principal leadership must be contextual, gradual, and relational. Motivation grows when teachers receive clear guidance, fair appreciation, emotional support, and realistic assistance in dealing with everyday teaching challenges.

The study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in one elementary school, so the findings cannot be generalized statistically to all rural schools. Second, the study relied on qualitative data from interviews, observation, and documents, so it did not measure the level of teacher motivation using a standardized scale. Third, the study focused on leadership strategies and did not deeply analyze student achievement data. Future research could use a mixed-method design, compare several rural schools, or examine how changes in teacher motivation influence student learning outcomes over time (Brandmiller et al., 2024).

D. Conclusions

Based on the findings, this study concludes that principal leadership strategies in rural elementary schools significantly enhance teacher motivation when implemented through a synergistic blend of participatory, instructional, and supportive approaches. Key practices including participatory planning, academic supervision, professional development, transparent appreciation, discipline coaching, and open communication collectively foster an environment where teachers improve their instructional preparation, classroom management, and professional accountability. However, the study also identifies critical obstacles that constrain these efforts: inadequate facilities, uneven teacher discipline, limited digital competence, varying awareness of continuous professional development, heavy administrative workloads, and scarce external support. In response, effective principals have demonstrated resilience by optimizing available resources, applying persuasive discipline guidance, encouraging participation in teacher working groups, introducing gradual digital practices, and promoting collegial teamwork. These actions underscore that rural school leadership transcends formal authority, requiring instead a balanced integration of instructional guidance, democratic participation, emotional support, and pragmatic resource management. Practically, this study recommends that principals in analogous rural contexts embed teacher motivation strategies as sustained, routine processes rather than episodic initiatives. Academic supervision should adopt a developmental, coaching-oriented mindset rather than a punitive, evaluative one. Recognition and rewards must be transparent, grounded in clear performance indicators, and consistently applied. Strengthening teacher learning communities is vital to facilitate peer reflection, innovation, and mutual support, while digital mentoring should be introduced incrementally, tailored to teachers' existing competencies and infrastructural realities. Crucially, district education offices must play a proactive role by upgrading school facilities, streamlining administrative burdens, and offering accessible, context-sensitive professional development programs to sustain long-term motivation gains. For future research, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies across multiple rural districts to test the generalizability of these strategies and identify contextual variations. Longitudinal designs would help track the sustainability of motivation improvements over time and their direct impact on student learning outcomes. Additionally, qualitative case studies exploring the lived experiences of principals, teachers, and community

stakeholders could uncover deeper socio-cultural dynamics that influence leadership effectiveness. Finally, investigating the mediating role of teacher self-efficacy or job satisfaction could provide a more nuanced theoretical model, while action research could co-develop and test innovative interventions tailored to specific rural school challenges.

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