

Principal Leadership Strategies in Improving Teachers' Performance Through Conflict Management and Strengthening Organizational Culture

Zainul Rifqi¹, Dessy Wardiah¹, Muhammad Juliansyah Putra¹

¹Universitas of PGRI Palembang, Indonesia

Corresponding author e-mail: zainulrifqi.zr@gmail.com

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the principal's leadership strategies in improving teachers' performance through conflict management and strengthening organizational culture at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang. A qualitative case study approach was employed, utilizing observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation for data collection. Data were analyzed through interactive model procedures. Findings reveal that the principal's strategies include open communication, problem clarification, deliberation, regulation enforcement, discipline, cooperation, routine supervision, and professional role modeling. Conflict factors stem from perceptual differences, ineffective communication, unequal task division, character variations, and high administrative burdens. Organizational culture strengthening is influenced by principal assertiveness, teacher commitment, clear rules, and a conducive work climate. Supporting factors include effective communication, teacher collaboration, consistent guidance, professional awareness, and firm regulations. Inhibiting factors comprise differing teacher responses to change, principal time constraints, administrative burdens, latent conflicts, and limited facilities. The integration of conflict management and culture strengthening positively impacts teacher performance through improved discipline, lesson planning quality, work motivation, and a more conducive environment. This study uniquely integrates conflict management and organizational culture strengthening as dual strategies within a single leadership framework in an Indonesian secondary school context. Principals are advised to develop communicative, participatory, and consistent leadership to create a harmonious and productive organizational culture. This research contributes empirical evidence that effective leadership strategies integrating conflict resolution and cultural reinforcement significantly enhance teacher performance, offering actionable insights for school leaders in similar urban secondary education settings.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Organizational Culture, Principal Leadership Strategy, Teachers' Performance

A. Introduction

Improving the quality of education in schools depends heavily on the competence and performance of teachers, the primary implementers of the learning process. Teachers are not only responsible for delivering material but also for creating meaningful learning experiences, managing the classroom, and developing students' character (Norman & Barbara, 2020). Therefore, teachers' performance is a crucial indicator of school quality. Various studies have shown that teachers' performance is influenced by internal and external factors, including the school's organizational environment, managerial policies, and social dynamics within the school community. Principal leadership, conflict management, and organizational culture are three elements proven to significantly impact teachers' performance in carrying out their professional duties (Sitorus et al., 2024).

In the context of educational leadership, principals play a strategic role as instructional and managerial leaders, as well as motivators for teachers. The leadership style adopted will influence teachers' perceptions of the work climate, clarity of school direction, and sense of ownership of organizational goals. Various studies have shown that transformational leadership can increase follower motivation, commitment, and performance through inspirational influence, intellectual stimulation, and individual attention. In education, principals who apply transformational leadership principles tend to be more successful in encouraging teachers to be more innovative, collaborative, and responsive to curriculum changes and student needs (Harsoyo, 2022; Wilson Heenan et al., 2023). This aligns with the findings of Afrida & Fitri (2022) that supportive and visionary principal leadership is positively correlated with improved teachers' performance.

In junior high schools, interpersonal dynamics between teachers and staff often give rise to potential conflict. Conflict can arise from differences in perception, workload levels, unclear division of tasks, and emotional factors or ineffective communication. Robbins & Judge (2019) emphasize that conflict is not always negative; functional conflict can spark creativity, while dysfunctional conflict can reduce productivity and performance. Therefore, the principal's ability to manage conflict constructively is a crucial part of a leadership strategy (Syafrin et al., 2025). In addition to leadership and conflict management, school organizational culture is inseparable from efforts to improve teachers' performance. Organizational culture is a collection of values, beliefs, work habits, and norms shared by all members of a school. Tadesse Bogale & Debela (2024) explains that organizational culture influences how individuals behave, make decisions, and interact within an institution.

A positive organizational culture, for example, one that fosters collaborative work, openness, discipline, innovation, and recognition of achievement, will boost teacher morale, strengthen commitment, and foster professionalism (Lase et al., 2025). A strong school organizational culture has been shown to strengthen the impact of

principal leadership on teachers' performance, as shared values serve as the foundation for behavior that supports the achievement of educational goals (Afrida & Fitri, 2022). Furthermore, a school's organizational culture, encompassing values, norms, shared work practices, and collective commitment, can foster a conducive work environment, support collaboration, and enhance teacher professionalism. When principals implement a supportive leadership style and simultaneously build a healthy organizational culture, the potential for improving teachers' performance is greater (Selvia et al., 2024). Although various studies have demonstrated that principal leadership, conflict management, and organizational culture influence teachers' performance, most of these studies examine each variable separately.

Research integrating these three variables simultaneously in the context of junior high schools is relatively limited. Furthermore, most previous studies have used a quantitative approach that focuses on examining the relationships between variables, thus failing to fully describe the empirical conditions that occur in the school environment. Based on the results of this review of previous research, a research gap remains regarding how principal leadership, conflict management, and organizational culture interact to influence teachers' performance in specific school contexts. Yet, these three aspects are interrelated elements in creating a conducive work climate that supports the improvement of teacher professionalism. Researchers believe that successful teachers' performance improvement is not solely determined by individual teacher abilities but also influenced by the quality of the principal's leadership, effective conflict management, and a strong organizational culture within the school. When these three aspects operate harmoniously, a work environment is created that encourages teachers to be more professional, innovative, and responsible.

Conversely, weak leadership, poorly managed conflict, and a less supportive organizational culture can hinder the optimal achievement of educational goals. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive examination of the relationship between principal leadership, conflict management, and organizational culture on teachers' performance in the context of SMP Negeri 35 Palembang. This research focuses not only on the relationships between variables but also draws on empirical conditions found in the field, thus providing a more contextualized picture of the factors influencing teachers' performance. This research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this research can enrich the body of knowledge in educational management, particularly regarding principal leadership, conflict management, organizational culture, and teachers' performance. Practically, the results of this study are expected to provide principals with valuable information to formulate more effective school management policies and strategies to sustainably improve teachers' performance and improve educational quality.

Based on initial observations at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang, several empirical issues were identified, indicating that teachers' performance and the school's organizational culture do not yet meet the ideal conditions envisioned by professional education

standards. Regarding teachers' performance, teachers are still found to have not implemented systematic and sustainable lesson planning. Learning tools such as lesson plans and teaching materials tend to be administrative in nature and do not fully reflect student needs or the demands of 21st-century learning. Furthermore, the implementation of innovative learning strategies, the use of instructional media, and the use of educational technology are still relatively limited and unevenly distributed among teachers. Furthermore, observations also revealed inconsistencies in discipline and professional responsibility, both in the implementation of teaching duties and in completing learning administration. Some teachers still tend to work routinely, lack reflection on learning outcomes, and demonstrate minimal initiative in self-development. This situation has direct implications for the suboptimal quality of classroom learning processes and student learning outcomes.

From a school organizational culture perspective, it was found that the values of togetherness, collaboration, and collective commitment have not been strongly internalized within the school's organizational life. Professional interactions between teachers remain partial and individualistic, so collaboration in learning development, pedagogical discussions, and sharing of best practices has not yet become an ingrained culture. Organizational communication is not yet fully open and constructive, as evidenced by persistent miscommunication, differing perceptions, and resistance to changes in school policy. Furthermore, conflict resolution mechanisms within the school environment have not been managed systematically and preventatively. Conflicts that arise are not solely related to the division of tasks and workloads but can also be caused by differences in individual character, perceptions of school policies, vested interests, or ineffective communication patterns. Based on initial observations, some conflicts tend not to be fully resolved, potentially developing into long-term, latent conflicts.

Prolonged conflict can have various negative impacts, such as a decline in harmonious working relationships between teachers, reduced levels of trust and teamwork, the emergence of cliques within the organization, and decreased work motivation. These conditions can ultimately hinder the implementation of school programs and reduce the quality of the learning process. Therefore, implementing effective conflict management is crucial for schools to ensure that any differences can be managed constructively and prevent them from escalating into conflicts that are detrimental to the organization. Based on this description, it can be concluded that teachers' performance issues at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang do not exist in isolation but are closely related to the principal's leadership style, the effectiveness of conflict management, and the school's organizational culture. Therefore, a comprehensive and in-depth study of the relationship between these three variables is necessary to formulate appropriate and contextual strategies for leadership, conflict management, and strengthening organizational culture to sustainably improve teachers' performance.

The interaction between principal leadership, conflict management, and organizational culture is interrelated and inseparable. Principals who are able to lead effectively are usually also skilled at building a positive organizational culture and managing conflict effectively. These three aspects work together to create a work environment conducive to improving teachers' performance. Therefore, a holistic study of the relationship between these three variables at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang is highly relevant. Through this study, the most effective leadership strategies, the most appropriate conflict management mechanisms, and elements of organizational culture that need to be strengthened to sustainably improve teachers' performance can be identified. Although various studies have demonstrated that principal leadership, conflict management, and organizational culture influence teachers' performance, the results of existing studies still show variation in findings and differences in research context.

Most previous research has examined the influence of each variable individually on teachers' performance, while research integrating all three variables into a single model is relatively limited. Furthermore, most studies have been conducted at different educational levels and with different school characteristics, so the results may not necessarily reflect the conditions at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang. Furthermore, the dynamics of school organizations continue to evolve along with increasing demands for teacher professionalism, changes in educational policies, and the complexity of working relationships between school personnel. These conditions require principals not only to be able to carry out leadership functions but also to be able to manage emerging conflicts and build an organizational culture that supports a conducive work environment. If these conflicts are not managed effectively, they can escalate into protracted conflict, potentially disrupting working relationships between teachers, reducing trust and teamwork, and impacting teachers' performance in carrying out their professional duties.

Based on initial observations at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang, indications were found that a collaborative culture had not yet developed optimally, organizational communication was not fully effective, and potential conflicts persisted due to differences in perception, division of tasks, and implementation of professional responsibilities. These conditions indicate that improving teachers' performance is not solely influenced by individual factors but is also closely related to the effectiveness of the principal's leadership, conflict management, and the organizational culture that develops within the school environment. The novelty of this research lies in the simultaneous assessment of the influence of principal leadership, conflict management, and organizational culture on teachers' performance at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang. This research not only analyzes the relationships between variables theoretically but is also based on empirical evidence that indicates problems with teachers' performance, a suboptimal organizational culture, and potential conflicts that can escalate into protracted conflict if not managed effectively.

Thus, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of the factors influencing teachers' performance in the junior high school context. This research is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this research can enrich studies in the field of educational management, particularly those related to principal leadership, conflict management, organizational culture, and teachers' performance. Practically, the results are expected to provide input for principals in formulating leadership strategies, conflict management, and strengthening organizational culture to improve teachers' performance and support the achievement of educational goals effectively and sustainably.

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because it aimed to gain a deeper understanding of social phenomena occurring within the school environment, particularly those related to principal leadership, conflict management, organizational culture, and teachers' performance. This research was conducted at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang. SMP Negeri 35 Palembang exhibits intriguing organizational and leadership dynamics that warrant in-depth study, including interactions between school members, conflict management, and the formation of organizational culture. The study's duration of approximately six months was based on methodological and technical considerations for qualitative case study research, which requires in-depth data collection and analysis. Subjects were selected using purposive sampling, a technique for selecting informants based on specific considerations and criteria relevant to the research focus and data needs.

Informants in this study were divided into primary and secondary informants. The principal was the primary informant, as he plays a central role in carrying out leadership functions, making strategic decisions, managing conflicts within the school environment, and building and strengthening the overall school organizational culture. The principal served as the primary data source, providing in-depth information regarding policies, strategies, and leadership practices implemented to improve teachers' performance. Meanwhile, supporting informants included the vice principal, senior teachers, junior teachers, school committee members, and student representatives. Supporting informants were selected to obtain more diverse and objective perspectives on the phenomena under study and to serve as a means of data triangulation to increase the validity and reliability of the research data.

In this study, data types were classified into several categories to enable systematic and comprehensive data collection and analysis (Moleong, 2021). First, data in the form of words and actions are obtained directly from informants through in-depth interviews and observations of the behaviour, activities, and interactions of research subjects in the school environment. This data serves as the primary source for understanding the phenomena of principal leadership, conflict management,

organisational culture, and their implications for teachers' performance. Second, written data sources, derived from official documents and school archives, such as the school's vision and mission, organisational structure, the principal's work programme, meeting minutes, school regulations, and other documents relevant to the research focus. This written data was used to strengthen and complement the data from interviews and observations.

Third, photographic data, obtained through visual documentation of activities and situations within the school environment. Photographic data serves as supporting evidence to illustrate actual conditions on the ground and assist researchers in data analysis and verification. Fourth, statistical data, supporting numerical data, such as the number of teachers, students, attendance data, and other relevant data. Although this research is qualitative, statistical data is still used to provide an overview and strengthen the description of the research context. Qualitative data collection in this study was conducted through unstructured questions. This means that the instrument used to interview respondents was flexible and open-ended, consisting of topic guides or outlines of questions without providing specific answer choices. This approach was chosen to explore respondents' perspectives, experiences, and meanings in greater depth and breadth, according to their context.

Data collection techniques used in this study included interviews, observation, and documentation. In this study, data analysis was conducted continuously, from the beginning of the data collection process until all data were collected, and continued over a specified period. This allowed the researcher to continuously reduce data, sharpen focus, and deepen meaning. Thus, data analysis was not conducted separately from the data collection process, but rather simultaneously and interactively until valid and comprehensive research findings were obtained. This analysis process was not linear, but rather cyclical, from the beginning of data collection until the research was completed (Miles et al., 2020). Data analysis activities include three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data interpretation in this study was conducted by interpreting field findings through interviews, observations, and documentation, which were then linked to relevant theories on leadership, conflict management, and organisational culture. The primary objective of this interpretation was to understand how principals implement their leadership strategies to improve teachers' performance through two main channels: effective conflict resolution and strengthening the school's work culture values. To validate the findings, their credibility was examined using persistent observation, triangulation, and peer debriefing techniques.

C. Results and Discussion

The Principal's Strategy for Managing Conflict and Building Organizational Culture
Research findings indicate that organizational conflict at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang generally arises from differences of opinion among teachers, misunderstandings in

communication, and imbalanced division of tasks. This situation demonstrates that conflict is an integral part of the dynamics of school organizations, which involve many individuals with varying educational backgrounds, work experiences, characters, and work styles. The high intensity of interaction in carrying out teaching and administrative tasks at school also increases the potential for conflict if not balanced by an effective communication and coordination system (Ertürk, 2022; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020). This aligns with the view (Robbins & Judge, 2019), which states that conflict is a natural phenomenon in organizations and does not always have negative impacts. In fact, it can be a learning tool for the organization when managed constructively.

The principal's strategy of detecting conflict early through regular communication reflects responsive and preventative leadership. Communication, whether through formal meetings, evaluation meetings, or daily informal communication, allows the principal to detect signs of conflict before it escalates into open conflict (Annet, 2025; Scarlet & Bărar, 2023). This approach reinforces the finding that open communication plays a crucial role in creating a sense of psychological safety for teachers to express differences of opinion or address issues they face. From a conflict management perspective, preventative measures through open dialogue are a strategic step that can minimize the negative impact of conflict on individual and organizational performance. Furthermore, the principal's clarification and mediation efforts demonstrate the application of a participatory and democratic leadership style. The principal does not immediately position himself as the sole decision-maker but rather acts as a facilitator, providing space for conflicting parties to express their views fairly. According to Bunaiyya et al. (2025), deliberation-based mediation can build a sense of justice, increase mutual understanding, and strengthen working relationships within an organization.

This practice is evident in the principal's efforts to resolve conflicts amicably, thus maintaining professional relationships between teachers and preventing long-term emotional barriers. On the other hand, the principal's assertion of work rules when conflicts arise regarding discipline or the performance of duties reflects a balance between a humanistic and structural approach. The principal not only prioritizes empathy but also demonstrates consistency in enforcing rules as part of establishing a school work culture. This assertiveness is crucial for maintaining clarity of roles, responsibilities, and work standards that must be adhered to by all school personnel. Fry et al. (2020) emphasized that principals are required to be assertive without neglecting the developmental aspect so that conflicts do not undermine teacher discipline and professionalism. Thus, the results of this study indicate that a principal's success in managing conflict is determined not only by their ability to resolve existing conflict but also by their ability to prevent, control, and utilize conflict as a means to strengthen working relationships and organizational culture. Effective conflict management contributes to the creation of a conducive, harmonious work climate that supports the continuous improvement of teachers' performance.

Factors Causing Conflict and Strengthening Organizational Culture

Research results indicate that organizational conflict at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang is influenced by various factors, including differences in perception, ineffective communication, unequal distribution of tasks, differences in individual character, and high workload pressure. These factors reflect the complex and interconnected internal dynamics of school organizations. Differences in teacher perception and character, for example, often arise from differing backgrounds, mindsets, and work styles in responding to policies and implementing school tasks. This situation becomes even more complex when not supported by an effective communication system, increasing the potential for misunderstandings among teachers and between teachers and leaders. According to organizational behavior theory, differences in individual perception and character are a major source of conflict within organizations (Robbins & Judge, 2019). Conflict intensifies when individuals feel they are not being treated fairly, particularly in the allocation of additional tasks or specific responsibilities.

High workload pressure and administrative demands also contribute to conflict, as they can trigger burnout and reduce teacher emotional stability. In this context, the principal's role is crucial in managing these differences and tensions to prevent them from escalating into prolonged conflict and negatively impacting teachers' performance and the school's work climate. Furthermore, the research also shows that strengthening organizational culture at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang is influenced by the principal's firmness and consistency in enforcing rules, teachers' commitment to their duties and responsibilities, clarity of work rules, cooperation among teachers, and the creation of a conducive organizational climate. These factors indicate that organizational culture is not formed instantly, but rather through a continuous process of habituation. The principal's firmness in enforcing rules provides certainty and clarity for teachers, while consistency in coaching strengthens the school community's trust in the leadership (Kayyali, 2025; Suharyanta, 2020).

These findings align with the organizational culture theory proposed by Schein (2017), which emphasizes that consistently applied values, norms, and habits shape the behavior of organizational members. In the school context, the principal's exemplary behavior is a key factor in the internalization of work culture values, as the leader's behavior directly serves as a reference for teachers and other educational staff. Thus, strengthening an effective organizational culture does not only depend on written rules but also on leadership practices that are able to foster commitment, cooperation, and a sense of belonging to the school organization.

Integration of Conflict Management and Organizational Culture

The integration of conflict management and strengthening organizational culture implemented by the principal at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang is evident in the conflict resolution approach, which is not solely focused on solving immediate problems but

also aimed at strengthening the values of togetherness, discipline, and professionalism within the school environment. Each conflict that arises is not viewed as a mere disruption but rather used as a means of reflection and evaluation of work systems, communication patterns, and coordination mechanisms between teachers. Through this approach, the principal strives to build a shared awareness that differences of opinion and work dynamics are part of the organizational process and must be managed maturely and constructively. These efforts reflect the application of the concept of transformational leadership, where the principal acts as an agent of change who not only resolves technical issues but also instills shared values, attitudes, and commitments within the school organization.

The principal strives to redirect conflict into a learning momentum for the organization, thus positively impacting the strengthening of work culture and improving the quality of professional relationships among teachers. The success of this integration of conflict management and strengthening organizational culture is supported by several important factors, including good communication between the principal and teachers, relatively solid teacher cooperation in carrying out school duties, and the principal's commitment to carrying out coaching and supervision functions. Open communication allows for collaborative discussion and discussion of any issues, reducing the potential for prolonged conflict. Teacher collaboration strengthens a sense of togetherness and collective responsibility for school goals, while the principal's commitment is a key driver in maintaining consistent implementation of values and work rules (Antinluoma et al., 2021; García-Martínez et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ng, 2020).

However, this integration also faces several inhibiting factors, such as differences in character and attitude among some teachers who are not always receptive to change, the principal's limited time for intensive coaching, and the teacher's high administrative burden. These factors pose challenges that must be managed sustainably to prevent them from hindering efforts to improve performance. Nevertheless, the principal continues to strive to maintain a balance between organizational demands and available resources, ensuring that the integration of conflict management and strengthening of organizational culture can continue effectively and sustainably to support improved teachers' performance.

Impact on Teachers' performance

The impact of the integration of conflict management and strengthening of organizational culture implemented by the principal at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang is comprehensively evident in the improvement of teacher discipline, the quality of lesson planning, professional cooperation, and teacher motivation. Improved discipline is reflected not only in attendance and punctuality but also in teachers' compliance with school rules and their awareness of consistently carrying out their duties and responsibilities. This demonstrates that effective conflict management and

the ongoing strengthening of organizational culture can create order, role clarity, and a sense of shared responsibility within the school environment.

In addition to discipline, the quality of teacher lesson planning has also significantly improved. Teachers are more focused on developing learning materials, such as syllabi, lesson plans, and learning evaluations, as part of efforts to enhance professionalism. A conducive work environment and harmonious working relationships allow teachers to focus more on developing pedagogical competencies without being distracted by interpersonal conflict or tension within the organization. This demonstrates that a positive work climate directly contributes to improving the quality of the classroom learning process.

The integration of conflict management and organizational culture also has an impact on increasing professional cooperation among teachers. A more harmonious working relationship fosters open communication, more effective coordination, and teachers' willingness to support each other in carrying out school tasks. This collaboration strengthens a culture of collegiality and a sense of togetherness so that teachers do not work individually but as part of a team with a shared goal. This condition is crucial for building a solid school organization that is adaptive to change. Furthermore, teacher work motivation also increases with the guidance, support, and attention provided by the principal. Teachers feel valued, involved in decision-making, and supported in facing various work challenges. These findings reinforce the opinion Mulyasa (2022) that effective principal leadership creates a conducive work climate that directly impacts teachers' performance. With a positive work climate, teachers become more focused and directed and have a stronger commitment to carrying out their duties, both in teaching and administration. Overall, integrating conflict management and strengthening organizational culture has proven to be an effective leadership strategy for sustainably improving teachers' performance.

D. Conclusions

Based on the research findings at SMP Negeri 35 Palembang, this study conclusively establishes that the principal's leadership plays a crucial and integrative role in managing organizational conflict and strengthening organizational culture to improve teacher performance. Organizational conflicts arising from differences of opinion, communication misunderstandings, imbalanced task division, individual characteristic variations, and workload pressures are recognized as inevitable dynamics. However, these conflicts are effectively managed through proactive strategies including early detection, open communication, clarification, mediation, and proportional enforcement of work rules, positioning the principal not merely as a decision-maker but as a facilitator and mediator who preserves professional relationships. This humane yet firm conflict management approach contributes to a harmonious, safe, and conducive work environment for teaching and administrative tasks. Concurrently, the principal consistently strengthens organizational culture by

instilling values of discipline, cooperation, professionalism, effective communication, and exemplary behavior, supported by consistent rule enforcement, teacher commitment, and a positive climate. The integration of conflict management and cultural strengthening reflects transformational leadership practices, wherein the principal acts as an agent of change directing organizational dynamics toward enhanced performance. The impact is evident across multiple indicators: improved teacher discipline, enhanced quality of lesson planning and implementation, strengthened professional collaboration, and elevated work motivation, with teachers demonstrating greater focus, direction, and responsibility. Practically, these findings mandate that school principals adopt an integrated leadership approach that simultaneously addresses conflict resolution and cultural development. Principals should receive training in mediation, communication, and emotional intelligence to effectively manage conflicts, while systematically reinforcing organizational values through consistent modeling, recognition, and policy implementation. Schools should establish clear conflict resolution protocols and regular climate assessments to proactively address tensions before they escalate. For future research, it is recommended to investigate the mediating role of teacher motivation or organizational commitment in the relationship between conflict management, culture, and performance. Comparative studies across different school levels and districts would enhance generalizability and reveal contextual variations. Mixed-method approaches combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews could provide deeper insights into teachers' perceptions of conflict management effectiveness and cultural strength. Longitudinal designs would track the sustainability of performance improvements over time and examine how leadership strategies adapt to evolving organizational challenges, thereby informing more resilient and responsive school management frameworks.

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