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The Role of Principals' Leadership in Improving the Professional Competence of Teachers in *Sekolah Luar Biasa* (SLB)

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Abstract: This study explores the role of principals' leadership in enhancing the professional competence of teachers in special education (*Sekolah Luar Biasa*/SLB) in Indonesia. Teacher competence in special education is a critical factor in ensuring the quality of learning for students with disabilities. At the same time, school principals hold a central position in creating supportive environments for teachers' professional growth. Despite the theoretical consensus regarding the importance of instructional and transformational leadership, a significant gap remains in understanding how these leadership practices are operationalized in resource-constrained special education contexts. To address this issue, the research employed a qualitative multiple-case study design at SLB A YPKR Cicalengka, Bandung Regency, and SLB BC Al Barkah, Garut Regency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and subsequently analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model with source and methodological triangulation to ensure data validity. The findings reveal that effective leadership in SLB is not confined to a single model but rather a dynamic integration of participative, instructional, transformational, and distributed approaches. Principals demonstrated adaptability by combining planning, organizing, implementation, and evaluation functions with collaborative and reflective practices. Limited financial and infrastructural resources were addressed through creative strategies, internal capacity building, and partnerships with external stakeholders. Importantly, principals' leadership fostered teacher motivation, ownership, and commitment, resulting in sustainable professional development. In conclusion, the study emphasizes that visionary and adaptive school leadership is essential for enhancing teacher competence in special education. The implications extend to leadership preparation programs and educational policy, underscoring the need for context-sensitive, holistic leadership models to improve the quality of education for children with special needs.

Keywords: Principal leadership, teacher professional competence, special education, instructional leadership, distributed leadership

INTRODUCTION

The provision of equitable and high-quality education for every child is a fundamental human right, a principle enshrined in international declarations and national legislation worldwide (Dona, 2024). In Indonesia, this commitment is formally articulated in *Undang-Undang Nomor 20 Tahun 2003* concerning the *Sistem Pendidikan Nasional*, which guarantees the right to specialized education for all citizens with physical, emotional, mental, intellectual, or social exceptionalities. This legal mandate reflects a worldwide consensus on the importance of inclusive education. However, translating this noble principle into effective practice presents a persistent and complex challenge for international education systems.

Special needs education is a field characterized by profound and systemic obstacles that transcend national borders. Schools dedicated to students with special needs, whether in developing or developed nations, frequently grapple with a standard set of difficulties, including inadequate funding, a scarcity of specialized resources and infrastructure, and the immense diversity of student disabilities (Madera & Dioso, 2025). The financial burden is often significant, as special needs schools require higher budgets for facilities, specialized staff, and operational costs compared to general schools. These material constraints are compounded by a persistent gap between inclusive education policies and their actual implementation within school environments. This disjuncture creates a demanding reality where school leaders and educators must navigate systemic limitations while striving to meet the unique and intensive needs of their students. (Dommer, 2019). The challenges faced by the Indonesian schools in this study, such as limited facilities and funding gaps, are therefore not merely local issues but are specific manifestations of a universal struggle. An in-depth analysis of leadership within these settings thus provides valuable insights for a global conversation on overcoming the shared barriers to quality special education.

Within this challenging landscape, the quality of education delivered to students with special needs is fundamentally determined by the professional competence of their teachers. The role of a special education teacher is exceptionally demanding, requiring a sophisticated and multifaceted skill set that extends far beyond standard pedagogical knowledge. (Aghajari & Heydari, 2024). Effective practice in this field necessitates expertise in a wide array of specialized strategies, including individualized instruction, differentiated learning approaches to accommodate diverse learning styles, the integration of assistive technologies, and advanced classroom management techniques to support students with complex behavioral needs. Furthermore, competence in this domain involves a deep capacity for providing emotional and social support, fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging, and building strong collaborative relationships with families. (Aghajari & Heydari, 2024).

Given the dynamic nature of special education and the continuous evolution of evidence-based practices, this specialized competence cannot be viewed as a static attribute acquired during initial training. Instead, it must be continuously cultivated through relevant and sustained professional development (PD) (Gul et al., 2021). Research confirms that effective PD is directly linked to the enhancement of teachers' instructional practices, their professional morale, and, ultimately, the academic and social-emotional achievement of their students. The stakes are incredibly high, as inadequate training and a lack of administrative support are primary contributors to the alarmingly high rates of attrition among special education teachers, a phenomenon that destabilizes schools and undermines the quality of the entire system. (Cunningham, 2019). This establishes a transparent causal chain: the complexity of student needs demands highly competent teachers, whose skills must be nurtured through ongoing PD. Failure to provide this support hinders student progress and fuels a workforce crisis. Therefore, investing in high-quality PD is not merely a best practice but a strategic imperative for ensuring both teacher retention and systemic quality in special education.

The responsibility for cultivating this essential teacher competence rests squarely on the shoulders of the school principal. To meet the profound developmental needs of their staff, principals in special needs settings must transcend the traditional role of an administrative manager and embrace the identity of an instructional leader (Alsarawi & Cieminski, 2024). The scholarly consensus is clear: effective school leadership, particularly in the context of special education, involves a deliberate shift in focus from bureaucratic tasks to the continuous improvement of teaching and learning (Alsarawi & Cieminski, 2024). The principal, in this capacity, acts as the chief architect of the school's professional learning environment, directly shaping the conditions under which teachers can develop their expertise and thrive professionally.

The practices of effective instructional leadership are well-documented and include several key functions. First, instructional leaders establish and communicate a clear vision and distinct educational objectives, which serve to align faculty efforts and create a shared sense of purpose. (Tahir & Fatima, 2023). Second, they actively foster a culture of collaboration by creating structures such as professional learning communities (PLCs), where teachers can share best practices, engage in collective problem-solving, and provide mutual support. (Tahir & Fatima, 2023). Third, they provide tangible support by facilitating access to relevant PD opportunities, allocating necessary resources, and organizing school schedules to ensure that teacher participation is feasible. (Drago-Severson, 2007). Finally, they are deeply engaged in the instructional core of the school, regularly observing classroom practices and providing teachers with constructive, actionable feedback to guide their growth. (Tahir & Fatima, 2023) Through these proactive and interconnected behaviors, the principal not only supports teachers but also strategically designs and cultivates the entire ecosystem in which professional expertise is developed. This conceptualization of the principal as an "architect of expertise" provides a robust framework for analyzing their impact on teacher competence.

Despite the robust theoretical consensus on the importance of instructional leadership, a significant gap persists between this ideal and its practical application in the daily reality of schools. This disjuncture is particularly acute in the high-stakes, often resource-constrained context of special education. Principals frequently report struggling to dedicate sufficient time to instructional leadership activities due to the overwhelming weight of competing administrative responsibilities. (Alsarawi & Cieminski, 2024). This reality is reflected in teacher experiences, where a perceived lack of meaningful administrative support is consistently cited as a key factor driving them from the profession, indicating a critical failure in the leadership function.

This global issue resonates particularly in the Indonesian context. Research by Hidayat (Hidayat, 2020), for instance, revealed that in many special needs schools (SLB), the principal's supervisory role had been reduced to an administrative formality. The supervision conducted was often superficial, failing to substantively engage with pedagogical practices or foster instructional innovation among teachers. This creates a clear and compelling research problem: while we have a strong theoretical understanding of what effective leadership should entail, there is a limited, in-depth understanding of how principals in uniquely challenging special education settings navigate their multifaceted roles to foster teacher competence genuinely. The critical unknown is not a matter of theory but of contextual implementation. The central question is how the general principles of instructional leadership are translated, adapted, and operationalized within the specific, complex ecosystem of a special needs school.

To address this critical gap between leadership theory and practice, this study provides a rich, descriptive analysis of the leadership management practices employed by principals to enhance the professional competence of teachers. The research aims to procure a thorough understanding of the principal's guidance in augmenting the vocational expertise of educators at two distinct case sites: SLB A YPKR Cicalengka in Bandung Regency and SLB BC AL BARKAH in Garut Regency.

By adopting a qualitative, descriptive methodology, this investigation moves beyond theoretical prescription to empirical exploration. It seeks to uncover the "how" of effective leadership by examining the specific management functions, planning, organizing, implementation, and evaluation that principals utilize to overcome systemic barriers and cultivate teacher expertise in their unique contexts. The contribution of this research is twofold. From a practical standpoint, by detailing the concrete strategies, programs, and processes used by the principals, this study offers tangible and context-sensitive models for other school leaders, policymakers, and leadership training programs, particularly those operating in similar environments. From a scholarly perspective, it contributes a nuanced, empirically grounded case study to the international literature on educational leadership. It provides a valuable counterpoint to research conducted primarily in Western, well-resourced settings, thereby enriching the global understanding of how leadership principles are adapted and enacted across diverse cultural and institutional landscapes

METHOD

Specifically, this study is designed as a case study. Case studies are empirical investigations that delve into contemporary phenomena in depth and in real-life contexts. (Adrias & Ruswandi, 2025). According to Creswell, case studies are an exploration of "bounded systems", both singular and plural, that are investigated over time through in-depth data collection involving various sources of information. (Creswell, 2014). The "tied systems" in this study are two different units of analysis: SLB A YPKR Cicalengka and SLB BC AL BARKAH Garut, where case boundaries are determined by specific time, location, and activities related to leadership management and teacher development.

This study further adopts a multiple-case study design. The use of multiple cases is not only aimed at gathering more data, but also fundamentally aims to build a stronger, more convincing, and analytically generalizable understanding. This design enables replication and comparison across cases, significantly strengthening the validity of the findings.

This research was conducted in two deliberately selected locations: SLB A YPKR Cicalengka, Bandung Regency, an educational institution specializing in services for students with visual impairments (visually impaired). SLB BC AL BARKAH, Garut Regency, is an institution that serves students with various special needs. These two locations were selected based on the reputation of the program that has been running, its track record in developing teacher professionalism, and the school's willingness to provide broad access for researchers to conduct in-depth investigations within a reasonable period of time.

To build an in-depth and layered understanding, this study applies a multi-method approach in data collection. As stated by Sugiyono, effective qualitative data collection often relies on a combination of observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis. (Sugiyono, 2022). These three techniques are used synergistically to complement and validate data.

In-depth interviews are the primary technique for exploring the perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and motivations of participants regarding leadership practices and their impact on professional competence. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach (Cohen et al., 2018). The researcher prepared an interview guideline that contained open-ended questions as a guide, but remained flexible to explore new themes that emerged spontaneously during the conversation. The focus of the interview questions was directed to examine the details of the four management functions that are the framework of the research: planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating teacher development programs. Each interview session is recorded in audio with the participant's consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Observations were made to obtain direct data on leadership behavior, teacher-to-teacher interaction, and school professional culture in its natural context (Fraenkel et al., 2012). This

technique enables researchers to compare what participants say in interviews with their actual behavior in everyday practice, serving as a crucial verification mechanism. The researcher assumes the role of observer-as-participant, attending to and carefully observing various relevant activities while minimizing active engagement to avoid intervention. The focus of observation includes staff meetings related to teacher development program planning, internal workshop sessions or in-house training, and academic supervision activities carried out by the principal to teachers. During and after observation, the researcher made detailed field notes, including thick descriptions of the background, participants, dialogues, activities, and initial analytical reflections.

Data analysis was carried out interactively and continuously from the beginning of data collection, using the Interactive Analysis Model from Miles and Huberman. The model consists of three interrelated flows of activities:

- a. Data condensation is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and organizing raw data from transcripts and field notes. This step involves coding to identify patterns and group them into thematic categories relevant to the research question.
- b. Data Display, the process of organizing information that has been reduced into a structured format, such as a matrix or chart, for ease of understanding. In this study, a cross-site comparison matrix was used to facilitate a comparative analysis between the two schools.
- c. Conclusion Drawing/Verification: the process of interpreting the meaning of identified patterns to formulate propositions. These tentative conclusions are then verified continuously by re-reviewing the raw data to ensure the final findings are solid and firmly rooted in empirical evidence (Miles et al., 2014).

To ensure the credibility of the research, the primary strategy employed is triangulation, which involves the use of multiple methods and sources to cross-check data and interpretation. First, Source Triangulation. Comparing data obtained from different participants (e.g., principal's perspective with teachers) to reduce potential bias from a single source. Second, Methodological Triangulation, which is by validating the findings of one data collection technique with data from another method (for example, interview findings are confirmed through observation and document analysis). The validity of the data is also strengthened through deep engagement in the field (prolonged engagement) to build trust and understanding of the context, as well as peer discussion (peer debriefing) to obtain external review. (Adrias & Ruswandi, 2025). Thus, the validity of the findings is systematically built through the overall design and research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of research at SLB A YPKR Cicalengka and SLB BC AL BARKAH Garut show that the leadership of school principals plays a fundamental role in improving teachers' professional competence.¹ However, a more in-depth analysis reveals that effective leadership in the Extraordinary School (SLB) environment does not rely on a single model. Instead, it is a dynamic blend of various approaches, especially instructional, transformational, participatory, and distributed leadership. This strategic combination creates a holistic support ecosystem, which is essential to foster the professional growth of teachers who face unique and complex challenges in educating children with special needs (ABK) every day.

In this context, the principal plays the role not only of an administrative manager but also of a cultural architect, a facilitator of learning, and a source of inspiration. They consciously integrate various management functions of planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating with a leadership style that is adaptive and responsive to the needs of teachers and students. The research in these two locations, SLB A YPKR Cicalengka, which focuses on visually impaired students, and SLB BC AL BARKAH Garut, presents different but complementary contexts.

These differences enable the identification of universal leadership practices as well as contextually tailored strategies, both of which contribute to the ultimate goal of ensuring that each teacher has the highest competence to provide the best education for their students. This report will unravel how each management function is implemented through the lens of modern leadership theory, supported by field data and enriched by international literature.

Table 1. Comparison of Leadership Strategies, Contextual Factors, and Impacts in Two Study Sites

Management/Leadership Functions	Key Strategies at SLB A YPKR Cicalengka	Key Strategies at SLB BC AL BARKAH Garut	Key Supporting Factors	Major Inhibiting Factors
Planning	Collaborative and participatory planning: Identify needs through open dialogue with teachers.	Planning based on the priority needs of students; in-depth analysis of the type of disability.	Active involvement of teachers in decision-making; A clear vision of the school.	Limited operational budget for comprehensive external training programs.
Organizing	Task sharing based on dialogue and mutual agreement to overcome staff limitations.	Assignment based on the teacher's specific competencies (background, experience, interests).	A supportive and mutually supportive work culture; Open communication between the principal and the teacher.	The limited number of educators often causes teachers to perform duties concurrently.
Implementation	Reflective academic supervision and <i>coaching</i> ; internal workshops with a <i>peer-sharing</i> model.	Practical and applied training; focus on specific teaching methods for autism/ADHD.	High commitment and dedication from teachers; Strategic partnerships with education agencies and foundations.	The gap in teacher readiness in adopting assistive learning technology.
Evaluation	Personalized and empowering feedback; Focus on recognition and development.	Structured and ongoing performance assessments; evaluation integrated with the student's Individual Learning Program (PPI).	Motivational transformational leadership; There is a continuous improvement cycle.	Limited facilities and advanced assistive technology tools for learning evaluation.

The planning stage of teacher competency improvement programs in both SLBs is not seen as a purely managerial task, but rather as a strategic implementation of participatory and distributed leadership. This process intentionally involves teachers in every step, from needs analysis to program design. This approach is based on the philosophy that the most effective development programs are those born out of real needs on the ground, not top-down instruction.

Field data confirms this philosophy. One principal stated: "*Saya percaya bahwa guru adalah ujung tombak. Perencanaan yang baik lahir dari kebutuhan nyata mereka di kelas, bukan hanya dari meja saya. Ketika program datang dari mereka, komitmen untuk menjalankannya penuh.*" This statement emphasizes the conviction that program ownership is

crucial to successful implementation. Observations during a planning meeting at one of the schools showed this dynamic in real terms: teachers not only became passive listeners, but also actively debated the urgency of the training topic, shared the challenges they faced, and jointly set priorities. This is a tangible manifestation of ongoing participatory decision-making.

This practice aligns with research findings that demonstrate the significant positive influence of participatory leadership on the performance and commitment of teachers' organizations. (Junaris, 2023). By involving stakeholders in setting school goals, principals build a foundation for shared governance that encourages innovation and teamwork. (Villafane, 2025). This leadership style empowers teachers, makes them feel heard and valued, which ultimately increases their intrinsic motivation to thrive. (Sariakin et al., 2025).

Furthermore, this participatory approach is not just an ideological choice but a crucial risk mitigation strategy, especially in the context of SLB, which often faces limited resources. SLBs generally operate with a minimal budget, where every rupiah must be allocated effectively. Investing funds in untargeted professional development programs is a fatal mistake that cannot be tolerated. By directly involving teachers in identifying needs, the principal ensures that the chosen program effectively addresses the most pressing classroom challenges. This maximizes the impact of every investment, both time and funds, spent on training. Thus, the participation of teachers in planning becomes a pragmatic necessity that directly connects the inhibiting factors (limited budget) with the chosen leadership strategy.

After planning, the organizing functions in both SLBs exhibit two different approaches, yet share the same goal: fostering a strong collaborative work culture. At SLB A YPKR Cicalengka, with limited staff, organizing is carried out through collaborative dialogue to share the workload fairly. Meanwhile, at SLB BC AL BARKAH Garut, principals apply a competency-based approach, placing teachers according to their specific expertise in dealing with particular types of disabilities.¹ These two strategies are different ways to achieve the same goal: ensuring that every human resource is optimally utilized to support student learning and teacher professional development.

The competency-based approach at SLB BC AL BARKAH has proven to be a powerful tool for professional development. A teacher recounts the experience: *"Awalnya saya ragu saat ditugaskan menangani siswa dengan spektrum autisme yang lebih kompleks. Tapi karena kepala sekolah percaya pada latar belakang psikologi saya dan memberikan pendampingan, saya jadi tertantang dan justru menemukan passion baru. Ini membantu saya berkembang."* This testimony demonstrates that proper assignments not only enhance teaching efficiency but can also foster teacher growth and motivation. On the other hand, observations of a teacher's meeting at SLB A YPKR demonstrate how a collaborative culture, built through dialogue, is manifested in practice. A senior teacher volunteers to take on additional tasks to ease the burden on their younger colleagues, reflecting a supportive and trusting work environment.

Both approaches are firmly rooted in the literature on high-leverage practices in special education, which emphasizes that collaboration between professionals is the foundation of student success. (McLeskey et al., 2017). The role of the principal is to be the primary facilitator of this collaborative culture by creating a structure that enables interaction, fosters trust, and ensures adequate communication flows. Through both dialogue and competency-based placements, the two principals effectively build what can be termed a Professional Learning Community (PLC), where expertise is shared and collective responsibility is fostered to promote student success.

The choice of different organizing strategies in the two schools is not a coincidence, but rather a reflection of adaptive leadership that responds to each other's contextual conditions. In SLB A YPKR, information about "a limited number of educators" explains why a dialogical approach makes more sense. In a situation where every teacher has to be a generalist and concurrently multitasks, a rigid competency-based system will be challenging to implement. Instead, a collaborative approach that is negotiable allows for flexible division of tasks

according to capacity and urgent needs. On the other hand, the competency-based approach at SLB BC AL BARKAH indicates the possibility of a staff with more diverse specialties, which allows the principal to place the "right people in the right place strategically". Thus, the leadership style applied is not just a personal preference, but a strategic decision that is tailored to the assets and constraints of the organization's human resources.

The implementation phase of the professional development program in both SLBs emphasizes the principal's role as an instructional leader. In the context of special education, this role becomes crucial. The principal not only ensures the program runs, but is also actively involved in guiding, modeling, and ensuring that each development activity truly enhances classroom teaching practices. They organize internal workshops, facilitate participation in external training, and most importantly, conduct regular academic supervision.

The supervision carried out in these schools goes beyond just administrative checks. One principal described it as a coaching process: "*Supervisi bagi saya bukan untuk mencari kesalahan, tapi dialog reflektif. Setelah observasi kelas, kami duduk bersama, saya bertanya, 'Apa yang menurut Ibu berhasil hari ini?' dan 'Area mana yang bisa kita tingkatkan bersama?' Ini adalah proses coaching, bukan audit.*" This approach transforms supervision from a stressful evaluation moment into an opportunity for reflection and growth together. In addition, the internal capacity-building model is also effectively implemented. Observations in one of the schools revealed a workshop session led by a teacher who had recently completed external training. This "train the trainer" model not only efficiently disseminates new knowledge but also empowers teachers and recognizes their expertise.

These actions align with the core responsibility of an instructional leader: creating a supportive learning environment and promoting the use of evidence-based teaching strategies (Lynch, 2012). This is especially important given that many principals report feeling ill-equipped to lead special education programs effectively.⁶ Effective instructional leaders proactively engage in teacher development, provide access to resources, and facilitate the coaching process (Gilson & Etscheidt, 2022). The use of the peer-to-peer sharing model and internal workshops is an implementation of "high-leverage practices" in teacher professional development.

This competency development model, which combines internal and external training, also demonstrates effective resource management. External training is often expensive and difficult to access due to limited budgets. By sending one or two teachers to share their knowledge internally, the principal multiplies the impact of a single investment. Meanwhile, internal workshops based on joint problem-solving and peer observation are cost-effective and highly relevant to the context of students at the school. This hybrid model is not only financially sustainable but also has a substantial pedagogical impact. It builds a culture of sharing expertise and implicitly positions teachers as leaders in their respective fields. (Maggin & Hughes, 2020), This is one of the tangible forms of distributed leadership (Tudryn et al., 2016) The role of the principal has shifted from being the only source of knowledge to being a facilitator of knowledge dissemination throughout the organization.

The evaluation process at SLB A YPKR and SLB BC AL BARKAH is not positioned as a judging endpoint, but rather as a driving force for continuous improvement. This approach reflects the essence of transformational leadership, where the ultimate goal is to inspire, motivate, and empower individuals to reach their highest potential. Evaluations are conducted through supervision, performance appraisals, and feedback sessions scheduled at least twice per semester, with a focus on development rather than just assessment.

The impact of this empowering evaluation approach is evident for teachers. A teacher shares his experience: "*Kepala sekolah tidak hanya bilang 'bagus', tapi beliau menunjukkan bagian mana dari RPP saya yang inovatif dan bagaimana dampaknya pada kemajuan siswa. Beliau juga mendorong saya untuk membagikan metode itu ke guru lain. Itu membuat saya merasa dihargai dan kompeten.*" This kind of feedback is much more meaningful than general

praise. It provides specific recognition, connects teachers' practices to student outcomes, and empowers teachers to be a source of knowledge for their peers.

This evaluation practice can be mapped directly into the framework of Transformational Leadership developed by experts like Natasha Veale. When the principal provides specific supervision and encourages problem-solving, he applies the S.E.E. (Specify supervision, Encourage problem-solving) principle. When he offers personalized feedback, recognizes innovation, and empowers teachers to share, he practices the principles of R.O.S.E. (Recognize, Offer personalized feedback, Share decision-making, Empower). This transformational approach, focused on empowerment and inspiration, is crucial to retaining special education teachers, a profession with high levels of stress and burnout. By building strong relationships and fostering a culture where each individual feels valued, transformational leadership directly increases attachment and job satisfaction. (Burnham Jr, 2018).

If analyzed more deeply, this evaluation process serves as the engine that drives the entire professional development cycle in schools. This cycle begins with the Planning stage, where needs are identified collaboratively. Then it continues to Implementation, where new strategies are tried in the classroom. The Evaluation Stage is then used to assess the effectiveness of the approach. However, the most important thing is how the findings from the evaluation, for example, the identification of teachers who excel in specific methods or other teachers who still need support, become direct input for the next planning cycle. This creates a dynamic and responsive feedback loop. Evaluation is no longer the end of a process, but rather a critical bridge that connects one cycle of improvement to the next. The transformational nature of the feedback provided, which motivates and empowers, ensures that teachers accept this cycle with enthusiasm, rather than resistance.

An analysis of the supporting and inhibiting factors reveals that the challenges faced by SLB A YPKR and SLB BC AL BARKAH are a reflection of broader systemic issues in special education leadership globally. The main bottlenecks identified, such as budget constraints and technology access gaps, are not unique problems. The international literature consistently reports that principals often feel ill-equipped to manage the complexities of school leadership, particularly in areas such as legal compliance, resource allocation, and instructional leadership for students with diverse needs.

In the face of these limitations, school principals show proactive and creative leadership. Partnerships with external parties, such as education agencies and foundations, are crucial survival strategies. A principal confirmed, "*Anggaran operasional kami sangat terbatas, jadi kami harus kreatif. Kemitraan dengan dinas pendidikan dan yayasan menjadi jalur hidup kami. Tanpa mereka, guru-guru tidak akan bisa ikut pelatihan berkualitas atau mendapatkan akses ke narasumber ahli.*" This statement highlights how networking and partnership-building skills are essential leadership competencies. These are no longer just ancillary activities, but rather a core strategy for managing resources and advocating in a system that is often underfunded (Brenner & Miller, 2024).

On the other hand, the most prominent supporting factor is the "high enthusiasm and dedication of the teachers". However, a more critical understanding shows that this teacher's commitment is not an independent variable that just appears. Rather, it is a direct result of the effective leadership practices outlined earlier. A participatory planning process makes teachers feel that they have a program (Villafane, 2025). A collaborative work culture creates a sense of mutual support and belonging (McLeskey et al., 2017). Strong instructional support from the principal increases the teacher's confidence and competence. And finally, transformational feedback makes teachers feel valued and motivated (Lynch, 2012). All of these elements cumulatively contribute to increased teacher motivation, engagement, and commitment.

Thus, the relationship between leadership and teacher commitment is not a linear relationship, but a mutually reinforcing cycle. Good leadership creates motivated teachers, and motivated teachers enable successful leadership initiatives, which in turn strengthen the leader's

confidence and effectiveness. Understanding the dynamics of these cycles is crucial, as it changes the way we view "supporting factors". Teacher commitment is not an exploited resource, but an asset that must be deliberately nurtured through visionary and humane leadership.

The overall analysis of this study concludes that effective leadership in Extraordinary Schools is not about mastering a single leadership style. Rather, it is the art of weaving various participatory, instructional, transformational, and distributed approaches into a holistic, adaptive, and sustainable ecosystem of professionalism. Successful principals are those who can flexibly switch roles and implement strategies that best suit the situation, whether in planning programs, organizing staff, conducting coaching, or evaluating outcomes.

The synthesis of the findings shows how each leadership approach plays a complementary role in building this ecosystem. First, Participatory and Distributed leadership applied in the planning stage builds a foundation in the form of a sense of collective ownership and responsibility among teachers. Second, dominant Instructional leadership during the implementation and supervision phases directly builds pedagogical skills and ensures evidence-based teaching practices are implemented in the classroom. Third, Transformative leadership, which is at the core of the evaluation and feedback process, fosters motivation, professional identity, and teacher resilience in the face of challenges.

The combination of these three pillars creates a school culture where teachers are not only administratively managed but also actively developed, supported, and empowered. In a complex and stressful environment like special education, multifaceted leadership is a must (Cline, 2019). A narrow focus, either on just rule compliance (managerial) or curriculum (instructional), proves insufficient. The integration of these various approaches is what allows schools to navigate tough challenges such as limited resources and high teacher stress levels, ultimately aiming to improve the quality of life and learning outcomes for students with special needs (Coviello, 2025).

These findings have important implications for various parties. First, for the Principal Preparation Program: There is an urgent need to integrate a specific curriculum on special education law, SLB financial management, and blended leadership models. Prospective principals must be equipped not only with theoretical knowledge but also with case studies and field experience relevant to the context of SLB. Second, for Policy Makers: This study underscores the importance of providing adequate funding and resources to support complex work in SLB. Policies must shift from simply meeting minimum standards to strategic investment in the capacity building of leaders and teachers in special education. Third, for Leadership Practice: School leaders, particularly in SLB, are encouraged to reflect on their practices and move beyond one dominant leadership style. They need to consciously adopt a more dynamic, flexible, and responsive approach to the unique contexts of the schools, teachers, and students they serve.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the leadership of school principals in special education settings plays a highly strategic role in enhancing the professional competence of teachers. The findings suggest that no single leadership model is capable of addressing the complexity of special education. Instead, effective leadership in special schools is characterized by a dynamic combination of participative, instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership approaches.

Principals act not only as administrative managers but also as cultural architects, learning facilitators, and change agents who can build a collaborative and supportive professional ecosystem. Through the management functions of planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating, integrated with adaptive leadership styles, principals succeed in creating an environment that encourages teachers to continually improve their professional competence.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that limited resources, both financial and infrastructural, are not absolute barriers. With visionary, collaborative, and transformative leadership, such limitations can be mitigated through creative strategies, the strengthening of a supportive work culture, and the development of external partnerships. The implications of these findings underscore the need for leadership development programs specifically tailored to the context of special education, with a focus on integrating multiple leadership models, developing networking skills, and fostering reflective and collaborative school cultures.

In conclusion, the success of professional development for teachers in special schools is strongly determined by the quality of principals' leadership, which can weave together diverse approaches into a holistic, adaptive, and sustainable strategy. Such a leadership model may serve as a reference for other schools, policymakers, and principal training programs in improving the quality of education for children with special needs.

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