

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL IN IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract

This study aims to explore in depth the experiences and perspectives of school principals in fulfilling their roles to enhance the quality of education at Taman Kanak-Kanak Taman Indriya (Taman Indriya Kindergarten), Boja Subdistrict, Kendal Regency. This research employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, focusing on the subjective meaning of participants' lived experiences. The data used in this study consist of the principals' and teachers' narratives obtained through in-depth interviews, observational field notes recorded during school activities, and relevant documents such as school programs, supervision notes, and teacher activity records. The data were analyzed using a phenomenological analysis technique following the stages of data reduction, coding, theme development, and meaning interpretation based on the lived experiences of participants. Through this process, the findings reveal that the principal perceives her role as a manager in designing and organizing programs participatively, as a leader who fosters positive relationships and work motivation, and as an innovator who develops contextual learning and promotes active parental involvement. These three roles are carried out reflectively and adaptively in response to the institution's challenges and needs. This study underscores the importance of a humanistic and contextual leadership approach in managing early childhood education. The findings have implications for strengthening the leadership capacity of ECE principals based on a deep understanding of real-world contexts and lived experiences.

Keywords

Leadership, Managerial, Principal, Professionalism.



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INTRODUCTION

This study focuses specifically on the context of Taman Indria Kindergarten, located in Boja Subdistrict, Kendal Regency. This institution holds an A-level accreditation and is recognized for its excellence in implementing integrated Islamic values, character education, and student achievement. The school's consistent performance cannot be separated from the dedication of its educators. However, beneath this surface of success, there are substantial academic concerns that merit deeper exploration, particularly regarding the ongoing need to strengthen teachers' professional competence in the face of dynamic educational demands.

One of the most pressing academic issues is how the principal's role contributes to improving the professional competence of teachers. In the context of early childhood education, professional competence includes mastery of subject matter, pedagogical skills, the ability to assess child development, and reflective teaching practices. The legal foundation for this competence is explicitly stated in Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers, which defines teacher competence as encompassing pedagogical, personal, professional, and social competencies acquired through professional education (Oktarina et al., 2024). Additionally, Regulation of the Minister of National Education Number 16 of 2007 further elaborates the standards of academic qualifications and competencies for teachers, including those working in early childhood education settings (Umasugi & dan Sarwono, 2014). The challenge lies not only in maintaining these competencies but also in enhancing them amidst dynamic curriculum reforms such as the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) framework, increasing demands for innovative teaching, and the growing need for inclusive and child-centered pedagogies. At Taman Indria Kindergarten, although teachers demonstrate dedication and consistency in performing their duties, variations in pedagogical depth, technological adaptation, and reflective capacity indicate a gap in professional growth, placing the principal's leadership role under critical scrutiny.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine how the principal at Taman Indria Kindergarten exercises leadership strategies to improve the professional competence of teachers. This includes identifying specific leadership approaches, whether transformational, instructional, or appreciative, and how these are operationalized in daily school practice. Transformational leadership, for instance, has been shown to significantly enhance the quality of early childhood education by fostering a positive learning environment and motivating teachers through inspirational practices

(Yakob et al., 2025). Similarly, principals who adopt transformational leadership steps can effectively enhance educator quality in early childhood education institutions (Nahdiyyah et al., 2021). The research explores the types of programs initiated by the principal, such as professional development workshops, supervision practices, learning innovation projects, and mentoring systems. It also investigates how the principal fosters a learning culture within the institution and motivates teachers to engage in continuous improvement.

Furthermore, the study identifies supporting and inhibiting factors in the principal's efforts. Supporting factors may include institutional support, teacher openness to change, parental involvement, and resource availability. On the other hand, inhibiting factors often include time constraints, limited funding for training, resistance to change among senior staff, and inconsistencies in policy implementation. These realities reflect the complex leadership landscape faced by school leaders, especially in early childhood education. Effective supervisory practices by principals have been found to directly impact teacher performance in early childhood settings, emphasizing the importance of the principal's role in navigating these challenges (Widyastuti et al., 2024).

Ultimately, the study aims to reveal the extent to which the principal contributes to tangible improvements in teachers' professional performance, as seen in planning quality, classroom implementation, assessment practices, and reflective behavior. By uncovering this contribution, the research not only enriches the understanding of educational leadership in early childhood settings but also provides practical implications for leadership development and teacher empowerment strategies. Through a focused phenomenological exploration, this study intends to highlight the academic relevance and practical urgency of enhancing principal-led initiatives for teacher professional growth in Indonesia's PAUD institutions.

Several previous studies have explored the role of school principals in developing teachers' professional competence, particularly in early childhood education settings. Research by Imron et al (2021) and Syafitri et al., (2023) found that principals' managerial roles significantly influenced the improvement of professional competence of kindergarten teachers through structured planning, program supervision, and continuous evaluation. Meanwhile, a study by Nur Laksmi Astutiningtyas & Kusumaningsih (2025) showed that the principal's supervisory role contributes directly to strengthening teachers' pedagogical practices and reflective capacity in PAUD institutions.

In another study, Shandilia Latunusa Ambawani et al (2024) and Suriagiri (2018) emphasized the importance of transformational leadership in fostering a supportive learning culture that enables professional growth among early childhood educators. Similarly, Joko Nugroho (2019) discovered that instructional leadership played a central role in enhancing teachers' classroom performance and use of creative learning strategies in kindergartens. Lastly, research by Lapir (2024) highlighted that teacher competence development was significantly supported by principals who encouraged collaboration, innovation, and emotional well-being in early childhood school environments.

Despite the contributions of these studies, a notable gap remains in understanding how the managerial and supervisory roles of principals are practiced operationally within a real-life kindergarten setting that has a unique educational character, namely, one that integrates Islamic values, emphasizes character education, and maintains high performance. Furthermore, most of the previous research focuses more on theoretical linkages between leadership and teacher outcomes, while the lived experiences, strategies, and challenges faced by school leaders in implementing those roles remain underexplored.

This study seeks to address that gap by providing an in-depth phenomenological analysis of how the principal of Taman Kanak-Kanak Taman Indriya (Taman Indriya Kindergarten) exercises managerial and supervisory roles in day-to-day practice. The novelty of this research lies in its contextual specificity, experiential depth, and its attempt to link leadership roles with professional competence development in a faith-based, character-driven early childhood setting, which also faces the contemporary challenge of adapting to curriculum reform (Merdeka Belajar). This makes the study both theoretically valuable and practically relevant. The main objective of this research is to describe and analyze in depth the implementation of the principal's role as a manager and as a supervisor in improving the professional competence of teachers at Taman Indria Kindergarten, Boja Subdistrict, Kendal Regency.

Theoretically, the findings of this study are expected to enrich the academic discourse in the field of educational management, particularly in the area of school leadership and teacher professional development at early childhood education (ECE) institutions. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how managerial and supervisory leadership roles are practiced in a specific institutional context, highlighting the integration of religious values, character education, and contemporary challenges such as curriculum reform. Pragmatically, the results are expected to provide evidence-based recommendations for various educational stakeholders, such as the

Department of Education, school principals, teacher supervisors, and PAUD educators, in evaluating and strengthening leadership practices that support the continuous improvement of teacher professionalism. These findings can serve as a reflective tool and guide for building sustainable quality enhancement strategies in early childhood education settings.

METHOD

This research is a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach (Hadi & Rusman, 2021). The phenomenological approach was chosen because this study aims to understand in depth the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals, in this case, the principal, in carrying out her role to improve the professional competence of early childhood teachers. The research was conducted at Taman Indria Kindergarten, a private early childhood education institution located in Boja Subdistrict, Kendal Regency. Taman Indria Kindergarten is characterized by its accredited status and a strong emphasis on religious character development, integrating Islamic values into daily routines such as reciting prayers and short Qur'anic verses, while implementing a thematic learning approach based on the 2013 Curriculum.

The phenomenon under investigation in this context is how the principal interprets and enacts her leadership role, as a manager, supervisor, and innovator, in responding to real challenges such as variations in teachers' pedagogical and technological competencies, limited school resources, and increasing demands for creative, child-centered learning. Through a phenomenological lens, this study explores the principal's direct experiences in designing and implementing context-specific and sustainable strategies for professional development in a faith-based school environment committed to educational quality (Hutagalung et al., 2021).

The data in this study consist of verbal narratives, field notes, observed behaviors, and documentation related to the principal's leadership practices (Fatah, 2023). The data sources include primary data obtained directly from individuals and secondary data obtained from documents and school archives (Nasir et al., 2023). Primary data were collected through direct interaction with the research subjects, while secondary data were accessed through written records such as lesson plans, teacher supervision notes, and institutional documents (Magister et al., 2022). Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation (Hardani MSi et al., 2020). In the observation stage, the researcher conducted on-site observations at Taman Indria Kindergarten, beginning in early February 2025 and concluding in mid-March 2025. During this period, the

researcher was present on location five days a week to observe learning activities, leadership routines, and interactions among school stakeholders. For the interview process, the respondents included the principal, three classroom teachers, one school committee member, and one educational supervisor from the local education office. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded with participant consent to ensure accuracy. The interviews explored perceptions, experiences, and strategies related to the principal's role in developing professional competence. In the documentation stage, data were obtained from institutional archives such as the principal's work program, minutes of teacher meetings, annual reports, supervision forms, and learning evaluation instruments. These documents were reviewed to triangulate and support the validity of findings obtained from observations and interviews.

Data analysis in this study followed the inductive qualitative tradition. It was conducted continuously, before, during, and after data collection, through the processes of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification (Chakma & Li, 2025). In the data reduction stage, the researcher sorted and categorized large volumes of raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. This step included coding and classifying themes relevant to the principal's managerial and supervisory roles (Nurrisa & Hermina, 2025).

In the data display stage, the researcher organized and presented the data in narrative form, highlighting patterns, interactions, and behaviors related to leadership practices at Taman Indria Kindergarten. These narratives focused specifically on how the principal facilitated teacher professional development through planning, mentoring, evaluation, and innovation. Data were then analyzed critically to understand the principal's role in improving teachers' professional competence at Taman Indria Kindergarten, Boja Subdistrict, Kendal Regency. The analysis was informed by relevant theories on transformational leadership, instructional supervision, and professional learning communities. Additionally, the findings were compared and contrasted with previous studies that investigated similar themes, such as Imron et al (2021), Dewi Nur Laksmi Astutiningtyas & Kusumaningsih (2025), and (Shandilia Latunusa Ambawani et al., 2024) to identify points of convergence or divergence. Where appropriate, the researcher formulated personal interpretations and critical reflections (antitheses) on the findings, particularly when existing theories did not fully explain the phenomena encountered in the field.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, several verification techniques were applied (Bingham, 2023). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with

participants and the research setting. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation. Confirmability was achieved by maintaining an audit trail that ensured the findings were grounded in the data and not influenced by researcher bias (Earnest, 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This research aims to describe in depth the role of the headmaster in improving the quality of education at Taman Indriya Kindergarten, Boja Sub-district, Kendal Regency. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through interviews with the headmaster, teachers, and school committee, as well as observations and documentation in the field. The results of this study are grouped into three main dimensions of the headmaster's role: as a manager, a leader, and an innovator. Each of these roles has an interconnected contribution in driving the improvement of education quality in this early childhood education institution.

Table 1. The Role of the Principal in Improving Teachers' Professional Competence at Taman Indria Kindergarten, Boja Subdistrict, Kendal Regency

No	Headmaster as Manager	Headmaster as a Leader	Headmaster as Innovator
1.	Enhances teachers' ability to plan, organize, and manage classroom programs.	Setting a shared vision of school quality and professionalism.	Introducing project-based learning and authentic assessment using portfolios.
2.	Encourages administrative and instructional accountability.	Building open and trusting communication with staff.	Promoting the use of simple digital media in early childhood instruction.
3.	Designing annual and semester-based school work plans collaboratively with teachers and staff.	Providing motivation, mentoring, and professional development opportunities.	Initiating parent involvement programs such as "Parents as School Partners".
4.	Conducting program monitoring and school activity evaluations.	Modeling discipline and dedication in daily practices.	Developing creative learning spaces using school yards.

Principal as a Manager

As a manager, the principal plays an essential administrative and planning role that directly supports the development of teachers' professional competence. The principal is actively involved in drafting the school's annual and semester work plans by engaging all educational personnel in the process. These plans include detailed strategies for learning, supervision schedules, teacher assignments, and school development targets, all of which align with national standards and the

institutional vision. This aligned with (Yuningsih et al., 2024), that the principal's managerial role is essential in improving teacher performance, particularly through effective planning and academic supervision

The principal also performs task distribution by mapping each teacher's strengths, qualifications, and workload, ensuring an equitable and strategic assignment of responsibilities. For example, teachers with strengths in storytelling or thematic planning are assigned as classroom coordinators, while others may be responsible for literacy corners or parent communication. This strategic delegation supports a more focused and effective teaching environment, allowing teachers to optimize their specific competencies. Effective human resource management by the principal enhances teacher professionalism and overall teaching quality (Sinaga et al., 2021)

Furthermore, the principal monitors the implementation of educational programs through regular supervision, both scheduled and incidental. She reviews teacher lesson plans, observes classroom practices, and holds post-observation reflective discussions. These supervisory activities are not only evaluative but developmental, serving as learning moments for both the teachers and the principal. Through this managerial approach, teachers become more structured in planning their lessons, more organized in classroom execution, and more consistent in documentation and reporting, all of which contribute to enhanced professional accountability and competence. Academic supervision carried out by the principal has proven effective in enhancing teacher professionalism (Amelia et al., 2022)

Principal as a Leader

In her role as a leader, the principal of Taman Indria Kindergarten functions not only as an administrator but also as a moral and professional guide. She consistently communicates a clear vision that emphasizes character-based education, integration of Islamic values, and professional excellence. This vision is shared and internalized by teachers through regular meetings, professional learning communities, and informal dialogue sessions. The principal's leadership is crucial in fostering a school culture that supports teachers' professional development (Pratiwi et al., 2023)

The principal fosters strong interpersonal relationships with the teaching staff based on trust, respect, and shared purpose. She maintains an open-door policy and often conducts informal check-ins to understand teachers' needs, challenges, and aspirations. This leadership style nurtures a safe and supportive working environment where teachers feel valued, heard, and motivated to improve their skills. Transformational leadership by the principal has been shown to increase teachers'

motivation and performance (Sholeh, 2021)

One significant leadership practice observed is the provision of structured motivation and mentoring. The principal routinely initiates workshops, in-house training sessions, and peer-teaching activities to ensure that teachers remain updated with current pedagogical approaches. She also mentors novice teachers directly by co-planning and occasionally co-teaching lessons, offering practical guidance grounded in daily school operations.

Moreover, the principal leads by example. Her punctuality, work ethic, and commitment to quality set a professional tone that influences the attitudes of teachers. This role modeling enhances the ethical and professional standards among staff, inspiring them to emulate positive behaviors in their own professional practice. As a result, teachers show greater engagement in classroom innovation, demonstrate better collaboration, and are more open to reflective practice, all of which strengthen their professional competence.

Principal as an Innovator

The principal's innovative leadership is evident in her ability to design and implement creative and context-sensitive solutions that address the evolving needs of early childhood education. One of her significant contributions is the introduction of project-based learning (PjBL) in the kindergarten setting. Although simplified to suit young learners, this method encourages children to explore, create, and present their learning in hands-on ways. Teachers are trained and supported in developing projects that integrate multiple areas of development, such as literacy, numeracy, social-emotional growth, and religious values. Implementing PjBL in early childhood education has been shown to enhance teacher engagement and competence (AlShamsi et al., 2022).

Authentic assessment using portfolios is another notable innovation. The principal has encouraged teachers to shift from checklist-based evaluations to more meaningful documentation of children's progress through collected works, anecdotal records, and developmental narratives. Teachers are guided in compiling these portfolios to reflect children's learning journeys more comprehensively. This shift challenges teachers to be more observant, reflective, and intentional in their assessments, an essential aspect of professional growth.

Parental engagement is also reinvented under the leadership of the principal. Through the "Parents as School Partners" initiative, parents are invited to contribute as learning volunteers, storytellers, or resource persons. This collaborative model redefines the teacher's role, requiring them to plan and coordinate with parents, thus enhancing their communication and coordination

skills.

Finally, the creative use of school space demonstrates the principal's capacity to innovate beyond the curriculum. The transformation of outdoor areas into thematic zones (e.g., a mini-garden, storytelling corner, and sensory pathways) provides rich learning stimuli for children and diverse instructional opportunities for teachers. In facilitating such innovations, the principal provides both inspiration and concrete support, empowering teachers to continuously seek new approaches in their professional practice.

Discussion

This section discusses the research findings regarding the role of the headmaster of Taman Indriya Kindergarten, Boja Sub-district, in improving the quality of education from three aspects: as a manager, a leader, and an innovator. This discussion aims to interpret the field findings within the framework of relevant theories and previous research results, in order to strengthen the scientific argument and contribute to the development of early childhood education management.

The managerial role of the headmaster at Taman Indriya Kindergarten indicates competence in managing all resources effectively and efficiently. The headmaster is capable of developing program plans, organizing teacher tasks, implementing educational programs, and conducting systematic evaluations. This is consistent with (Aquino et al., 2024) opinion stating that the headmaster, as an educational manager, must be capable of designing work programs, managing human and physical resources, and evaluating the achievement of educational goals. Similarly, Fu (2023), emphasized that strong managerial planning supports the sustainability of professional development initiatives at the early childhood level.

The headmaster's ability to conduct regular supervision and monitoring is an important instrument for maintaining the quality of the learning process in the classroom. The emphasis on supervision as a form of coaching, rather than merely assessment, becomes an effective strategy for building a reflective work culture among teachers. This strengthens the findings of (Iglesias Vidal et al., 2025), who stated that the managerial dimension in school leadership contributes significantly to the improvement of learning quality when combined with two-way communication and the strengthening of teacher professionalism. In line with this, Sari & Huzairin (2021) argue that academic supervision in early childhood education plays a critical role in aligning pedagogical practices with developmental goals.

Furthermore, the structured administrative management and task distribution demonstrate competency in school-based management, where the headmaster acts as an internal quality controller. This ability is important in the context of early childhood education (PAUD), where the integration of holistic services and a child-centered approach is a primary demand (Wasilaturrohman & Rochmawati, 2024). Additionally, research by Fitriyani et al. (2022) highlights that effective delegation and planning by principals leads to increased teacher efficiency and organizational performance (Olaifa et al., 2024).

The headmaster's leadership as a visionary and transformative leader is strongly felt at Taman Indriya Kindergarten. The headmaster not only performs supervisory functions but also serves as a source of inspiration and motivation for teachers and other educational staff. This aligns with the concept of transformational leadership, according to Shandilia Latunusa Ambawani et al (2024), where leaders build emotional relationships, provide idealized influence, and motivate followers to exceed individual goals for the common good.

The leadership shown by the headmaster is not authoritarian but collaborative and participatory. This is reflected in the involvement of teachers in decision-making, providing space for creativity, and open communication. This model supports the theory of distributed leadership Masruhin et al (2022), which emphasizes the importance of leadership being distributed through school structures and practices as a whole. This perspective is reinforced by (Galdames-Calderón, 2023), who explain that distributed leadership fosters ownership and initiative among teachers.

The example set by the headmaster in terms of discipline, hard work, and responsibility has a positive impact on the school's organizational culture. The school environment becomes conducive, teachers feel valued, and have high intrinsic motivation to develop themselves. This finding strengthens the study by Permana & Karwanto (2020), which stated that the headmaster's leadership contributes indirectly to student outcomes through the creation of supportive working conditions for teachers. Moreover, (Riany Setyowati et al., 2019) found that the emotional intelligence and role modeling of school leaders are key factors in shaping teacher morale and engagement in PAUD institutions.

The role of innovator carried out by the headmaster of Taman Indriya Kindergarten demonstrates adaptive capacity to changing times, particularly in addressing the challenges of 21st-century learning for early childhood. The headmaster is capable of designing and implementing various innovations that are contextual, relevant, and have a direct impact on child development.

As noted by Nusantara Putri (2024), innovation in early childhood education requires flexibility, creativity, and leadership that supports experimentation.

Innovations in learning, such as the application of a project-based approach and the use of simple digital media, provide meaningful learning experiences for children. This approach is in line with the principles of early childhood learning that emphasize learning through play and exploration (Indahwati et al., 2023). The development of portfolios as an authentic assessment instrument also shows awareness of the importance of qualitative and individualized assessment, consistent with the characteristics of PAUD students.

Furthermore, parent involvement through the "Parents as School Friends" program proves that the headmaster recognizes the importance of partnership in education. Parent involvement is not only administrative but also as partners in children's learning. This aligns with Wahyu Ro & Saputri (2024) view on school, family community partnerships that contribute to improving child learning outcomes holistically. The headmaster's creativity in managing limited facilities and infrastructure is a unique strength. The utilization of outdoor space as a learning medium reflects an educational environment approach that stimulates children's curiosity. This is consistent with the Reggio Emilia pedagogy principles that consider the environment as the third teacher for children.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study conclude that the principal of Taman Indria Kindergarten in Boja District plays a crucial role in improving the professional competence of teachers through three interconnected roles: as a manager, a leader, and an innovator. As a manager, the principal organizes and implements planning, supervision, and program evaluation systematically. As a leader, she motivates, guides, and sets an example that fosters professional growth and a supportive school climate. As an innovator, the principal introduces learning innovations, authentic assessments, and parent engagement strategies that encourage teachers to be more reflective, adaptive, and creative. These roles collectively contribute to the development of teachers' pedagogical, professional, and social competence and demonstrate the principal's direct influence on the advancement of teaching quality in early childhood education.

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