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School Leadership Transformation: The Role of Motivation in Linking Competence, Work Environment to Principal Performance

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the influence of the work environment and competence on work motivation, as well as their direct and indirect effects on the performance of high school principals in Langsa City. The main issue identified is the low motivation and performance of principals due to an unsupportive work environment and suboptimal competence. The research employs a quantitative approach using path analysis, based on survey data collected from 240 teachers and school supervisors. The results show that competence and work environment significantly affect work motivation, while motivation strongly influences principal performance. Competence has both direct and indirect effects on performance, whereas the effect of the work environment on performance is fully mediated by work motivation. These findings highlight the crucial role of motivation as a bridge between competence and work environment in improving principal performance, while also enriching educational leadership theory and school management policy development.

Keywords: Work Environment; Competence; Work Motivation; Path Analysis; Principal Performance.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a crucial role in human resource development. One of the key components of the education system is the principal, who not only performs administrative duties but also acts as a learning leader, guiding and motivating teachers and students to achieve educational goals (Grissom, Egalite, et Lindsay 2021; Pratiwi 2023). Principals play a strategic role in ensuring the transformation of educational inputs into quality outputs (Ma et al. 2024; Umikalsum, Fitria, et Rohana 2021).

Principal performance is a key factor in improving the quality of education, as effective leadership has been shown to significantly impact student learning outcomes (Bush 2024; Gatama, Otieno, et Waweru 2023)(Bush 2024; Gatama et al. 2023). Optimal principal performance positively impacts the quality of learning in schools, thus becoming a crucial factor in determining the quality of education (Özdemir et al. 2022; Veletić, Price, et Olsen 2023). The quality of education largely depends on the ability of principals to fulfill their roles as both educational leaders and managers (Enur Rohmah 2021; Garshasbi, Yecies, et Shen 2021; Smolle et al. 2021).

International research shows that school leadership is the second most important factor after teaching quality in improving student achievement (Bush 2024; Grissom et al. 2021; Shen et al. 2020), especially through the role of the principal in creating a conducive school climate, supporting teacher professionalism, and designing quality-oriented learning policies (Ozdogru, Sarier, et Korucuoglu 2025; Pietsch, Aydin, et Gümüş 2025; Richardson et Khawaja 2025; Tshabalala et Faremi 2024). On the other hand, recent literature emphasizes that not all dimensions of leadership have the same influence. The principal's managerial and pedagogical competencies, work environment conditions (e.g., collegial support, availability of facilities, workload), and work motivation play an important role as mechanisms that determine how much leadership impacts school performance (Abunaser, El-Din, et Al-Fahadi 2025; El Achi et al. 2025; Hakim et al. 2023; Karaferye et Bellibaş 2025). This is relevant to the transformational leadership model, which views motivation and the work environment as mediators between principal competency and school institutional performance (Shen et Wu 2024). Other studies confirm that the work environment and work motivation play a significant role in improving individual performance, including in the educational context (Hanaysha, Shriedeh, et In'airat 2023; Nusraningrum et al. 2024).

Several previous studies have highlighted a single aspect, such as principal competence, on institutional quality (Asyari, Fangestu, et Al Husna 2024; Ramli, Muhammad Latif 2022), while others have focused on the work environment (Anantasia et Rindrayani 2025; Prasetyono, Ramdayana, et Estiningsih 2020) or work motivation (Esisuarni, Alqadri, et Nellitawati 2024). Their findings indicate that high principal competence is directly related to improved educational quality and school success (Arhipova, Kokina, et Michaelsson 2021; Asyari et al. 2024; Mukhtar et MD 2020; Zulaikah 2020). A positive work environment has been shown to improve principal motivation and performance (Lianasari et Ahmadi 2022; Nurlela, Jumawan, et Sahlan 2024; Zhenjing et al. 2022). Meanwhile, work motivation is an important mediating variable that strengthens the relationship between competence and work environment on performance (Arroyo, Peñabaena-Niebles, et Correa 2023; Eyal et Roth 2011; Nusraningrum et al. 2024; Ramadhani Lubis, Putri, et Gultom 2024; Sonedi 2021).

However, most previous studies tend to analyze the relationship between the two variables separately without considering the simultaneous interrelationship between these factors. For example Aswadi & Lubis's (2015) study emphasized principal competence without examining motivational aspects (Aswadi Lubis 2015), while Prasetyono et al.'s (2020) study focused on the influence of the work environment without considering the indirect effects on performance (Prasetyono et al. 2020). This situation creates a significant research gap; few studies have integrated the influence of the work environment, competence, and work motivation simultaneously on principal performance (Yan 2020).

A preliminary study of senior high schools and vocational high schools in Langsa City in 2024 identified issues such as inadequate work environments (low lighting, poor air circulation), weak teacher discipline, and low work motivation, all of which negatively impact principal performance. An unsupportive work environment has been shown to hinder teacher productivity and reduce the quality of learning (Arroyo et al. 2023; Gatama et al. 2023). These findings reinforce the importance of a deeper understanding of the interactions between these factors (Grissom et al. 2021; Ma et al. 2024).

This study offers scientific novelty by integrating work environment, competency, and work motivation variables into a single analytical model to explain their influence on principal performance. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding than previous studies that only examined

the relationship between two variables (Nusraningrum et al. 2024; Özdemir et al. 2022; Shen et al. 2020). Using path analysis, this study identifies the direct and indirect influences between exogenous variables (work environment and competency), intervening variables (work motivation), and endogenous variables (principal performance) based on empirical data from teachers and school supervisors in Langsa City (Hanaysha et al. 2023; Veletić et al. 2023; Wahyuni 2023).

An integrative approach combining work environment, competence, and motivation is crucial in 21st-century education, which demands adaptive and innovative leadership. Principals must foster collaboration, leverage technology, and inspire teachers to innovate (Alshidi et Binti Ahmad Rashid 2025; Hidayati et al. 2024; Ruloff et Petko 2025; Takhahasi et Rossi 2024). Transformational leadership competencies enhance teacher commitment and performance (Hawanuran Syifahaya et Istanto 2025; Xin et al. 2025). In this context, work motivation drives principals internally, while a positive work environment strengthens this drive externally.

Thus, the conceptual model developed in this study enriches educational leadership theory and offers practical guidance for improving school management at local and national levels. The study supports the achievement of SDG 4 (Quality Education) through better school governance and leadership. Strong principal performance enhances learning quality, teacher well-being, and sustainable student achievement (UNESCO 2023). In Indonesia's context of educational autonomy, strengthening principals' competence and motivation is essential to align national policies with each school's specific needs.

This study aims to analyze the influence of the work environment and competence on work motivation, as well as their direct and indirect effects on the performance of high school principals in Langsa City. Using the path analysis method, the study examines causal relationships among the work environment, competence, motivation, and principal performance (Wahyuni 2023). Data are collected through questionnaires completed by teachers and school supervisors in Langsa City. The path diagram, which illustrates the structure of causal relationships among the variables, is presented in Figure 1.

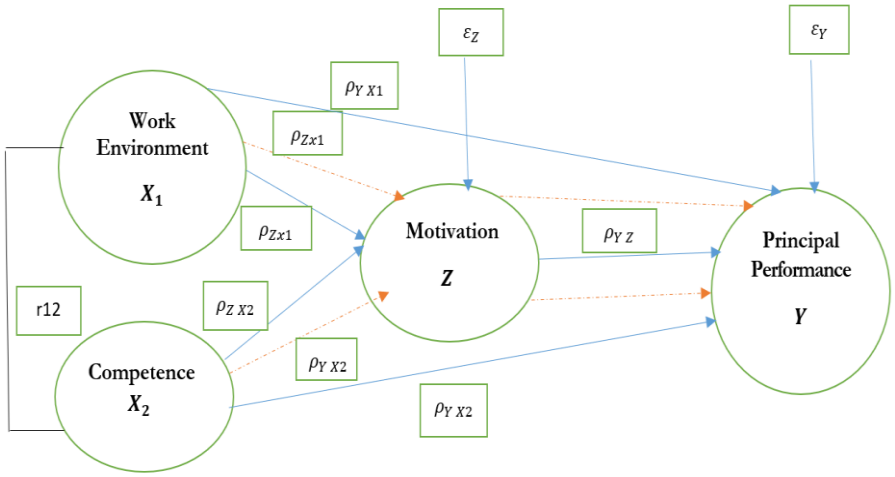

Figure 1. Research Path Diagram.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used primary data collected through field surveys using questionnaires. Respondents provided their perceptions of the work environment, competence, work motivation, and principal performance. The questionnaires aimed to examine the relationships among these variables. The research was conducted in all senior high schools in Langsa City, selected for its relevance to the study variables and the respondents' direct involvement in school leadership and performance.

The population of this study included all teachers and school supervisors at the senior high school in Langsa City. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, with criteria for respondents including teachers and supervisors who had at least three years of service, were familiar with school managerial policies and practices, and were actively involved in educational quality improvement activities. The total sample consisted of 240 respondents, determined based on the requirements of the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method, which recommends a minimum of ten times the number of indicators in the construct with the largest number of paths (Hair et al. 2019).

The collected data were analyzed using PLS-SEM with the SmartPLS software. The analysis was carried out in two stages: evaluation of the outer model to test construct validity and reliability, and evaluation of the inner model to examine causal relationships among variables through the values of the path coefficients and R-square. A mediation test was also conducted to assess the role of variable Z as an intermediary between X1 and X2 in influencing Y.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Outer Model Test

a. Convergent Validity Test

From Figure 2, it can be observed that all indicators of the variables (X1, X2, Z, Y) have outer loading values greater than 0.7, indicating that each indicator has a strong correlation with its respective construct (Hair et al., 2021). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs are also greater than 0.50 (X1 = 0.618; X2 = 0.662; Y = 0.684; Z = 0.617), signifying that each construct demonstrates good convergent validity.

b. Reliability Test

The Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values for all constructs exceed 0.70, namely: X1 = 0.878 and 0.906; X2 = 0.898 and 0.922; Y = 0.908 and 0.928; Z = 0.875 and 0.906. These results indicate that all constructs have high internal consistency and reliability. Hence, the measurement model satisfies the construct reliability requirements (Henseler, Ringle, et Sarstedt 2015).

c. Discriminant Validity Test

The Fornell–Larcker Criterion test shows that the square root of the AVE for each construct is higher than the correlations among other constructs, indicating no discriminant validity issues. Furthermore, the Cross Loading values show that each indicator has the highest loading on its intended construct compared to others, further confirming discriminant validity.

2. Inner Model Tes

a. R-Square Test

The R^2 value for variable Y is 0.725 (Adjusted R^2 = 0.720), and for variable Z is 0.244 (Adjusted R^2 = 0.235). This means that variables X1 and X2 simultaneously explain 72.5% of the variance in Y and 24.4% of the variance in Z. These values fall into the strong category for Y and the moderate category for Z (Hair et al. 2019).

b. Path Coefficients Test

Table 1. Path Coefficients Test

Path	Coefficient	T-Statistic	P-Value	Description
X1 → Y	0,014	0,315	0,753	Not significant

X1 → Z	0,200	3,107	0,002	Significant
X2 → Y	0,132	3,042	0,002	Significant
X2 → Z	0,444	6,767	0,000	Significant
Z → Y	0,781	21,771	0,000	Significant

Source: Researcher Data Processing

The results of the path coefficient analysis show that the direct effect of the work environment (X1) on performance (Y) is not significant, as indicated by a T-statistic value of 0.315 and a P-value of 0.753 (> 0.05). However, the work environment (X1) significantly influences work motivation (Z) (T = 3.107; P = 0.002), and competence (X2) has a significant effect on both work motivation (Z) (T = 6.767; P = 0.000) and performance (Y) (T = 3.042; P = 0.002). Moreover, work motivation (Z) significantly affects performance (Y) (T = 21.771; P = 0.000). These findings indicate that motivation plays a crucial role as a mediator in explaining the relationship between the exogenous and endogenous variables.

c. Mediation Test

Table 2. Mediation Test

Mediation Path	**Coefficient**	**T-Statistic**	**P-Value**	**Description**
X1 → Z → Y	0,156	3,029	0,002	Significant
X2 → Z → Y	0,347	6,675	0,000	Significant

Source: Researcher Data Processing

The mediation analysis results indicate that work motivation (Z) significantly mediates the effect of both the work environment (X1) and competence (X2) on principal performance (Y). This implies that a supportive work environment and high principal competence can enhance performance more effectively through increased work motivation. In other words, motivation acts as a partial mediator, strengthening the indirect influence of X1 and X2 on Y.

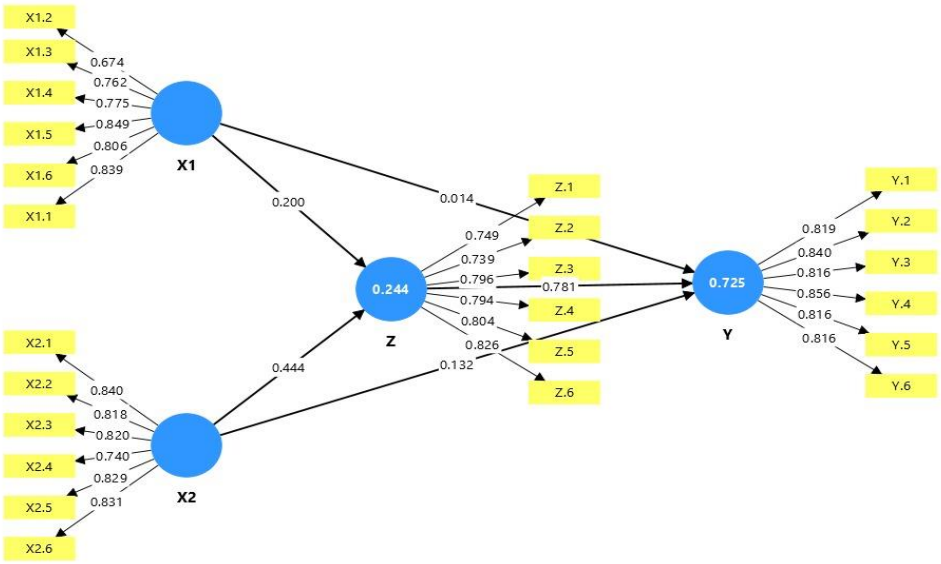

Figure 2. Outer Model

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1 (H1): X1 has a significant effect on Y

The test results show that the effect of X1 on Y is not significant (β = 0.014; t = 0.315; p = 0.753). A p-value greater than 0.05 indicates that H1 is rejected. This means that an increase in X1 does not directly increase Y. Theoretically, this result indicates that variable X1 does not contribute directly to changes in Y, but its effect may occur indirectly through a mediator (Z). This is consistent with the mediation theory explained by Nitzl et al. (2016), which states that an indirect effect can replace a direct effect if the mediator is strong. Research by Rahman et al. (2021) also found similar results, where the exogenous variable does not directly affect the outcome because its effect is mediated by an intervening variable. Thus, even though H1 is rejected, the presence of Z allows X1 to still play an important role in the model.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): X1 has a significant effect on Z

The path test shows that X1 has a positive and significant effect on Z (β = 0.200; t = 3.107; p = 0.002). A p-value <0.05 indicates that H2 is accepted. This result indicates that an increase in X1 will significantly increase Z. Theoretically, this suggests that X1 has the ability to influence the mediating variable (Z), which in turn will impact Y. This finding supports the causality theory in mediation models proposed by Hair et al. (2021), which states that the relationship between exogenous and endogenous constructs is often

strengthened through the role of a mediator. Research by Henseler et al. (2015) also shows that a strong relationship between exogenous and mediators is a prerequisite for the formation of a significant mediation effect. Thus, H2 is confirmed and strengthens the mediation structure in the model.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): X2 has a significant effect on Y

The analysis results show that X2 has a positive and significant effect on Y ($\beta = 0.132$; $t = 3.042$; $p = 0.002$). Since the p value is <0.05, H3 is accepted. This means that an increase in X2 will directly increase Y. This result indicates that X2 has a direct effect without having to go through a mediator. Theoretically, a direct relationship like this indicates that exogenous variables have a fairly strong effect on outcomes (Hair et al., 2021). Research by Chang et al. (2023) also supports this result, stating that certain exogenous variables can still have a direct effect on the dependent variable even though there is a mediator in the model. Thus, X2 can be categorized as a construct that has a dual role, namely a direct and indirect influence on Y.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): X2 has a significant effect on Z

The test results show that X2 has a strong and significant influence on Z ($\beta = 0.444$; $t = 6.767$; $p = 0.000$). A very small p-value (<0.001) indicates that H4 is strongly accepted. These results show that X2 is an important determinant in increasing Z. Theoretically, these results confirm the concept in the theory of causal relationships that exogenous variables can strengthen the mediation effect through a significant influence on the mediator (Henseler et al., 2015). Research by Kock (2015) supports this finding, where a strong exogenous-mediator relationship will enlarge the total effect on the endogenous variable. Thus, these results confirm the important role of X2 as the main predictor that drives the increase in Z.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Z has a significant effect on Y

Based on the analysis results, variable Z has a very strong and significant influence on Y ($\beta = 0.781$; $t = 21.771$; $p = 0.000$). The large coefficient value indicates that Z is the most dominant variable in explaining the variation in Y. Therefore, H5 is accepted as highly significant. Theoretically, this supports the view of Hair et al. (2021) that a strong mediator can explain most of the exogenous influence on endogenous. This result is also in line with the research of Chang and Huang (2022) which found that mediating variables with a large influence on outcomes have a strategic role in strengthening predictive models. This means that variable Z is the main path connecting the influence of X1 and X2 on Y.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): Z mediates the effect of X1 on Y (X1 → Z → Y)

The analysis results show that the indirect effect of X1 on Y through Z is significant with a coefficient of β = 0.156, t value = 3.029, and p = 0.002. Since the p value <0.05, H6 is accepted. This means that the variable Z acts as a mediator that significantly channels the influence of X1 on Y. In other words, even though the direct relationship between X1 and Y is not significant, X1 can still indirectly influence Y through an increase in Z. This pattern is known as full mediation, where the mediator variable fully channels the exogenous effect to the endogenous (Zhao et al., 2010)

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the view in Structural Equation Modeling theory that mediating variables play a crucial role in explaining complex causal relationships (Hair et al., 2021). According to Nitzl et al. (2016), when the direct path is insignificant but the indirect path is significant, the mediator construct becomes the primary element in the causal relationship. In this context, Z functions as an intervening variable that strengthens the impact of X1 on the final outcome (Y).

These findings align with research by Rahman et al. (2021), which shows that weak exogenous-endogenous relationships can become significant after being mediated by a strong intervening variable. Furthermore, a study by Alvarado et al. (2022) in the context of organizational management also demonstrated that mediating variables can alter the direction and strength of relationships between constructs, making them strategic elements in causal models. Thus, these results confirm that without Z, the influence of X1 on Y would be statistically insignificant, but through Z, the relationship becomes significant and substantive. Practically, this shows that interventions to improve Y should be focused on strengthening factor Z obtained through X1.

Hypothesis 7 (H7): Z mediates the effect of X2 on Y (X2 → Z → Y)

The test results show that the indirect effect of X2 on Y through Z is significant with a coefficient value of β = 0.347, t value = 6.675, and p = 0.000. Because the p value < 0.001, then H7 is accepted as highly significant. This means that an increase in X2 can affect Y not only directly but also through variable Z. This finding indicates that the relationship between X2 and Y is partially mediated by Z, because both the direct effect (X2 → Y) and the indirect effect (X2 → Z → Y) are both significant.

Theoretically, this condition supports the concept of partial mediation as explained by Zhao et al. (2010), where the mediating variable does not completely replace the direct influence, but strengthens the relationship between the exogenous and endogenous variables. According to Hair et al. (2021), such a

pattern indicates that the exogenous construct has two mechanisms of influence: a direct path and an indirect path mediated by a mediator. This result strengthens the strategic role of Z as a key variable in the model, because most of the influence of X2 on Y is channeled through Z.

This finding is consistent with Chang and Huang's (2022) study, which found that partial mediation, improves model stability and strengthens the theoretical validity of the relationship between variables. Furthermore, Kock's (2015) study also showed that a significant indirect path indicates the existence of a complex causal mechanism that cannot be explained solely by a direct relationship. Therefore, the results of this study indicate that the effect of X2 on Y is dual: direct and through the intermediary Z. Practically, this suggests that strengthening Z will magnify the total effect of X2 on Y, making it a more effective strategy for improving outcomes than simply strengthening X2 directly.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that not all relationships between variables are significant due to differences in direct and indirect influence pathways. Variable X1 does not have a significant effect on Y because its effect does not occur directly, but rather through variable Z, which acts as a mediator. Conversely, X1 has a significant effect on Z, which then has a strong impact on Y. Variable X2 has a significant effect both directly on Y and indirectly through Z, indicating partial mediation. Meanwhile, Z is the most dominant variable explaining changes in Y because it functions as the main link between X1 and X2 on Y. Thus, a significant effect in this model occurs when there is a strong mediation pathway through Z, while a relationship that is not adequately mediated results in an insignificant effect. Based on the results of the study, it is recommended that future research expand the model by adding other variables that have the potential to strengthen or moderate the relationships between variables, thereby clarifying the causal mechanisms of significant and insignificant effects. Future research can also use different contexts and populations to test the consistency of these results. Practically, improvements in the outcome variable Y should focus on strengthening variable Z as the main mediator, as Z's role has been shown to be most influential in transmitting the effects of X1 and X2 on Y.■

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