

Principal Leadership in Developing Administrative Staff Competence: A Case Study of the Center of Excellence Vocational School

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Abstrak: This study aims to analyze the leadership of school principals in developing the competencies of school administrative staff at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan as a Center of Excellence Vocational School. The research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design involving six participants, consisting of one principal, one school administrative staff head, and four school administrative staff. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations during four weeks of school hours, and documentation studies, then analyzed through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results of the study show that leadership is manifested through vision development, routine supervision and evaluation every semester, implementation of needs-based education and training, provision of feedback, resource development, strengthening of cooperation, and development of a school culture based on 6S values. school administrative staff competencies have met the standards of Permendiknas Number 24 of 2008, but there is a gap in ICT competencies, where out of 25 school administrative staff, only 15 are proficient in using computer applications, so 40% still need strengthening. Limited BOSP budgets are also a factor hindering professional development.

Kata Kunci: Principal Leadership; Administrative Staff Competency; Educational Leadership; Vocational Education; Administrative Management.

INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of vocational education in Indonesia has become a strategic national agenda, especially after the implementation of the Center of Excellence Vocational High School (SMK PK) program. This program emphasizes educational units that excel not only in the learning process but also in professional, accountable, and adaptable school management and administration in line with technological developments. In this context, school leadership is a key factor in mobilizing all human resources, including school

administrative staff, to support the achievement of vocational education quality standards (Asrin et al., 2022; Khaulah et al., 2024).

School Administrative Staff play a strategic role in ensuring the smooth operation of schools, ranging from personnel management, finance, infrastructure, correspondence, student affairs, to public services (Nuraisah et al., 2025). Based on the Regulation Kementerian Pendidikan Nasional Republik Indonesia, Nomor 24 Tahun 2008, school administrative staff competencies include personal, social, technical, and managerial competencies. From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, improving the competencies of administrative staff is an organizational investment that contributes directly to the effectiveness and productivity of educational institutions (Shell, 2023; Zerrad & Schechter, 2025).

The results of a quantitative study of 158 administrative staff and 63 administrative heads in 18 vocational school districts showed that the technical competence of administrative staff reached an average of 82.75%, which is categorized as good (Anisah et al., 2020). This data indicates that, in general, vocational school administrative staff have adequate technical and administrative skills. However, this average achievement does not necessarily represent equal quality across all educational units. Variations in context, leadership support, availability of training, and other structural factors have the potential to affect the actual level of competence in each school (Karaeng et al., 2025; Singerin, 2024).

As a school designated as a Center of Excellence Vocational High School (SMK), SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan faces demands and pressures to improve the quality of administrative services in line with the needs of the business world and industry. Based on the initial findings of the study, of the 25 school administrators, only 15 showed good computer skills in digital-based administration. This means that around 40% of administrative staff still need to strengthen their ICT-based technical competencies. In addition, budget constraints and limited resources, such as budgets for professional development, staffing regulations, and high administrative burdens, pose additional challenges in the process of improving competencies.

This condition suggests that the development of school administrative staff competencies should not only be viewed from an individual capacity perspective, but also in terms of how school principals are able to design continuous and structured staff development strategies within the limitations of available resources. Thus, issues regarding the competencies of school administrative staff need to be understood within the broader framework of educational organizational leadership.

Several studies over the past five years have examined the relationship between school leadership and improved human resource performance in educational settings. In the context of transformational leadership, studies referring to Bernard M. Bass's framework of thinking emphasize that the dimensions of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration contribute to improving the performance of educational staff and forming a collaborative and adaptive organizational culture (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Research by Abunaser et al., (2025) emphasizes that school principals with good leadership competencies are able to create a clear school vision, direct administrative staff, and encourage innovation and collaboration within the school environment, thereby improving administrative performance. In the context of vocational education, research conducted by Utomo & Santosa, (2024) shows that the transformational leadership of school principals plays an important role in the implementation of Total Quality Management (TQM) in vocational high schools. The results of the study confirm that school principals who are able to build a collective vision and encourage active staff participation will improve the overall effectiveness of school management. These findings reinforce the argument that strategic leadership is a determining factor in improving the quality of vocational institutions.

In line with that, Permana et al., (2025) Transformational leadership that involves planning, encouraging innovation, collaboration, and continuous professional development can improve individual and group competencies in the field of vocational education. However, this study still focuses on teachers as educators and not on educational staff or school administrators. Further research by Norman et al., (2025) argues that school leadership integrated with professional development and digital innovation strategies can significantly improve staff competence. This study is in line with the importance of the human capital approach, in which competence development is viewed as a strategic investment for educational organizations. However, the research subjects are still dominated by educators and do not explicitly examine school administrators.

Further, El Achi et al., (2025) revealed that transformational leadership and work environment have a simultaneous influence on the performance of educational staff. These findings expand our understanding that contextual organizational factors such as work climate, resource support, and management systems moderate the relationship between leadership and individual performance. However, non-teaching staff variables have not been the main focus of this study.

On the other hand, research related to school administrative staff is still relatively limited and tends to be descriptive. Some studies only focus on technical competencies or the quality of administrative services without integrating the variable of principal leadership as a major determining factor. In the context of vocational schools, studies that specifically examine the relationship between principal leadership and the development of administrative staff competencies are still rarely found in international literature.

Overall, the literature reviewed shows that: (1) effective transformational leadership improves the performance of educators; (2) professional development strategies contribute to improving individual competencies; and (3) contextual organizational factors play a role in strengthening or weakening the influence of leadership. However, most studies still focus on teachers or educators, while studies that integrate principal leadership, staff development strategies, and school administrative staff competencies, especially in the context of Center of Excellence Vocational High Schools (SMK), are still very limited. Existing studies tend to discuss aspects of supervision, training, or motivation partially, without building a holistic conceptual framework.

Thus, there are research gaps that need to be filled, namely: (1) the lack of a comprehensive approach in analyzing school principals' leadership in developing all dimensions of school administrative staff competencies; (2) the lack of contextual studies on Centers of Excellence vocational schools; and (3) the weak integration of transformational leadership theory, human capital theory, and competency-based development models into a single integrated analytical framework.

This study aims to describe aspects of school principal leadership, school administrative staff competencies, and factors that hinder the improvement of school administrative staff competencies at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan. With a more holistic approach, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of educational leadership studies in the administrative sphere, while also providing practical recommendations for the continuous strengthening of school administrative staff capacity.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEOTRICAL FRAMEWORK

Principal Leadership in Educational Organization

School leadership has long been identified as a key determinant of school effectiveness. In international literature, there are several dominant approaches that shape the discourse on educational leadership, namely transformational leadership, instructional leadership, transactional leadership, and distributed leadership. Transformational leadership, which grew out of a

theory developed by Bernard M. Bass, emphasizes the leader's competence in building a shared vision, providing inspirational motivation, encouraging intellectual stimulation, and giving individual attention (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Studies show that this approach correlates positively with organizational commitment and staff performance (Aldossari & Alanizan, 2025; Alzoraiki et al., 2023; Jiatong et al., 2022). However, some studies also show that the effect on organizational outcomes is indirect and mediated by other variables such as school culture and professional capacity (Saad Alessa, 2021). On the other hand, instructional leadership focuses on improving the quality of learning and academic supervision (Gechere et al., 2025). Although this model is effective in improving student learning outcomes, some critics argue that this approach pays insufficient attention to non-teaching staff, including administrative personnel. (Li et al., 2023; Ozdogru et al., 2025).

Distributed leadership offers a collective perspective by emphasizing shared participation in decision-making. This approach has the potential to increase the involvement of administrative staff, but its effectiveness is highly dependent on the organizational structure and collaborative capacity of the school (Eriksson et al., 2025; Hasselgren et al., 2021). Meanwhile, transactional leadership places greater emphasis on control and reward systems. Although effective in maintaining procedural stability, this model is considered less adaptive in the context of organizational change and digital transformation (Fournier et al., 2022).

The literature shows that there is debate about which approach is most effective. Some studies assert the superiority of transformational leadership (Aldossari & Alanizan, 2025; Alzoraiki et al., 2023; Jiatong et al., 2022), while other meta-analyses show that instructional leadership has a more direct influence on academic outcome (Li et al., 2023; Ozdogru et al., 2025). However, almost all of these studies focused on teachers, not school administrative staff.

Administrative Staff Competence in Vocational Education

School Administrative Staff is a strategic part of modern education management. From the perspective of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Individual competence is seen as an investment that increases organizational productivity. Studies show that strong administrative capacity correlates with school management effectiveness and public accountability (Al-Ghonmeein et al., 2025; Kabakus et al., 2025; Zhang & Nasir, 2025). However, research on administrative staff in secondary education, particularly vocational education, is still relatively limited compared to research on teachers.

In the context of vocational education, administrative complexity increases due to the need for coordination with industry teams, performance-based reporting systems, and the digitization of school management. Several studies show that high technical competence is not always accompanied by adequate managerial and adaptive competence, especially in developing countries. (Antonietti et al., 2022; Rauseo et al., 2022). Furthermore, several studies show significant variations between schools in terms of administrative digital readiness, indicating that organizational and leadership factors play an important role in shaping the actual capacity of administrative staff (Roll & Ifenthaler, 2021; Yang et al., 2023).

Leadership Strategies for Staff Development

Staff competency development in educational organizations requires a systematic and needs-based strategy. The competency-based development model emphasizes the identification of competency gaps, training planning, intervention implementation, and continuous evaluation (Lewis et al., 2022). Studies show that effective leadership in staff development focuses not only on formal training, but also on monitoring, collaborative learning or training, and strengthening organizational culture (Carson et al., 2023; Stoffman, 2022). However, several studies also show that professional development programs often fail to achieve significant impact when they are not supported by a consistent leadership vision (He et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2024).

There are also contradictory findings showing that investment in training does not always result in improved performance if the organization faces structural limitations or cultural resistance (Park et al., 2023; Ryu et al., 2021). Hal This reinforces the argument that development strategies must be positioned within an integrative leadership framework.

Contextual Factors in Indonesian Vocational Schools

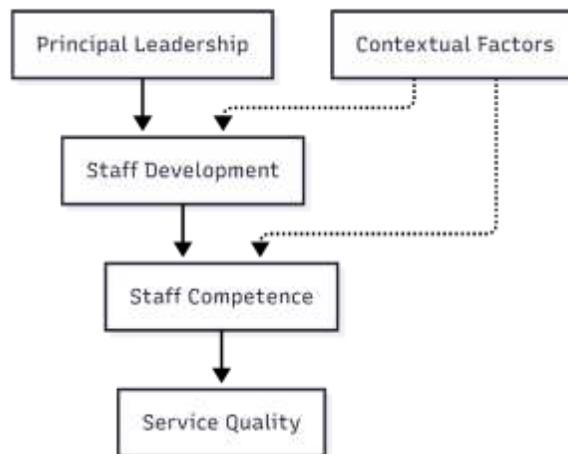
Vocational schools in Indonesia face unique pressures, including demands for link and match with industry, digitization of administration, and budget and staffing restrictions. Research shows that contextual factors, such as resource availability, bureaucratic structure, and work culture can moderate the influence of leadership on staff performance (Kholil et al., 2025; Sunaryo et al., 2023). Therefore, the effectiveness of leadership in improving school administrative staff competencies at the Center of Excellence Vocational School cannot be separated from the surrounding structural conditions and policies.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three main theoretical foundations, namely Transformational Leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994) Theory, Human Capital

Theory, and Competency-Based Development Model. Conceptually, school principal leadership is positioned as a strategic variable that influences school administrative staff competency development through the implementation of staff development strategies, with contextual factors as moderating variables.

Figure 1. **Conceptual Model**



The conceptual framework emphasizes that school leadership is the main driver of staff development, which has an impact on improving the competence of administrative staff and ultimately on the quality of school services. However, this relationship is also influenced by contextual factors such as policy, budget, and organizational culture. Thus, the quality of administrative services is the result of synergy between effective leadership and a conducive environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Sugiyono, 2019) The leadership of the principal in improving the competence of School Administrative Staff at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan in a natural context. This approach was chosen because this study aims to explore the meaning, process, and dynamics of leadership practices that cannot be measured quantitatively. In this study, the researcher acted as the main instrument directly involved in the data collection and analysis process. This research was conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, Bengkulu Province.

The research subjects consisted of one principal and five school administrators, for a total of six subjects. Although there were twenty-five school administrators in total, informants were selected using purposive

sampling with certain considerations, namely having a minimum of two years of work experience, being directly involved in core administrative services such as finance, correspondence, personnel, student affairs, or facilities and infrastructure, representing a variety of employment statuses (civil servants, PPPK, and honorary staff), and having experience and knowledge related to principal leadership practices.

The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which is the process of collecting data that is stopped when the information obtained has been repeated and no new significant categories or themes are found. Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews and involved participant observation and documentation. Each interview was conducted face-to-face. All interviews were recorded with the informants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

The interview questions were tailored and focused on aspects of vision development, supervision and evaluation, implementation of education and training, provision of feedback, resource development, cooperation, school culture, and factors hindering the improvement of school administrative staff competencies. In addition to interviews, observations were also conducted during the study at school hours to directly observe the administrative service process, meetings or coaching activities, principal supervision practices, and the use of information technology in administrative management.

The results of the observation were recorded systematically in the form of field notes. Documents were used to reinforce the data obtained from the observation interviews, including the school's vision and mission documents, administrative staff work programs, training reports, meeting minutes, administrative archives, and documentation of school activities. Triangulation was carried out by comparing and confirming data from the three techniques.

Data analysis is conducted interactively and takes place from the beginning of data collection until the data is complete. The analysis stage includes data collection, data reduction, drawing conclusions, and verification (Heriyanto, 2018). Next, in the data reduction stage, researchers select and identify, group, and focus on data relevant to the research focus.

The themes were developed based on aspects of school principal leadership, dimensions of administrative staff competencies in accordance with Permendiknas Number 24 of 2008 (personality, social, technical, and managerial competencies), as well as inhibiting factors. To ensure data validity, this study applied source and technique triangulation, member checking by reconfirming interview results and data interpretation with informants, peer debriefing through discussions with colleagues or academic advisors, and audit trails by

documenting the entire research process, including interview transcripts, field notes, supporting documents, and coding results.

The researchers also implemented reflexivity by being aware of their position and background and striving to minimize bias in the data interpretation process. This study adhered to research ethics principles by obtaining official permission from the school, requesting informed consent from each informant, maintaining the confidentiality of informants' identities by using codes or initials, and ensuring that the data was used solely for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study involved six participants consisting of one school principal, one school administrative staff head, and four School Administrative Staff members who handle correspondence and filing, student affairs, finance, and special services. All participants were interviewed in depth to explore the leadership practices of school principals in improving school administrative staff competencies.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Informant Code	Position	Role
NW	Principal	Policy Maker
HP	Head of Administrative Staff	Administrative Coordinator
S	Administrative Staff	Correspondence & Archiving
RF	Administrative Staff	Administration
A	Administrative Staff	Administration
M	Administrative Staff	Special Services

Aspects of School Principal Leadership

Vision Development

Vision development is the main foundation in efforts to improve the competence of School Administrative Staff. The principal not only formulates the vision formally, but also integrates it into daily administrative work practices. In an interview conducted by the researcher with informant NW, the principal of SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, he stated:

“At SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, a specific vision and mission have been formulated to guide the implementation of school administrative services. The school administration staff vision is to realize educational services that are innovative and equitable. When administrative staff have a complete and comprehensive understanding of this vision and mission, it will influence the way they work, encouraging the creation of a more structured, focused, and structured work pattern that focuses on improving service quality” (Interview, June 13, 2025).

This vision was then translated into administrative work targets, such as deadlines for completing correspondence, an orderly filing system, and improved public services. The principal emphasized:

“.....Understanding of the vision and mission significantly influences the work patterns of administrative staff, motivating them to work more effectively and efficiently, prioritize the principle of excellent service, and demonstrate a high level of commitment to continuous improvement of their capacity and competence” (interview, June 16, 2025)..

School Administrative Staff felt the concrete impact of this clear direction, based on the results of interviews conducted. Also based on the results of interviews conducted with informant S, a school administration staff 1 staff member at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, namely:

“At SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, there is a specific vision and mission for school administration staff. This vision and mission serve as work guidelines that provide clear direction for school administration staff in carrying out their duties and responsibilities.” (Interview, June 18, 2025).

In practice, the vision is disseminated through annual meetings, displayed in administrative offices, and used as the basis for developing work programs. This process demonstrates that the vision is not merely a normative document, but rather a tool for guiding work behavior.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Supervision is carried out directly and continuously. The principal monitors administrative documents, evaluates reports, and supervises performance on a regular basis. The results of interviews conducted with informant NW as principal of SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan are as follows:

“Supervision and evaluation of school administration staff work is carried out regularly with the aim of assessing individual and team performance, developing school administration staff competencies, enforcing discipline and work ethic, and improving administrative services. This supervision and evaluation cover various aspects such as individual performance, administrative systems, and the use of technology” (interview, June 13, 2025).

Supervision and evaluation of Education Administration Personnel are conducted to assess individual and team performance and improve competence. Through a continuous supervision process and objective evaluation, various strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of administrative tasks can be identified. An interview with HP, the head of School Administration Personnel at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, said:

“The supervision and evaluation of school administration staff work is carried out by the principal to ensure the quality of administrative work, identify strengths and weaknesses, and adjust tasks to technological developments and the demands of the times. The principal supervises and evaluates both by directly observing the work of school administration staff and by conducting supervisory activities every semester.” (Interview, June 16, 2025).

Supervision and evaluation of school administration staff are carried out periodically by the principal to ensure smooth operations and administrative effectiveness at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan. The aspects evaluated include individual performance, administrative systems, technology utilization, and correspondence skills. The implementation of routine supervision and evaluation has a significant impact on improving the competence of school administration staff at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan..

Implementation of Education and Training

Competency development is carried out through needs-based training. This development is carried out through an education and training process that is important in efforts to improve their competence, professionalism, and adaptability to the dynamics of educational service needs. Through structured training programs, administrative staff can acquire new knowledge, technical skills, and a deeper understanding of effective and efficient administrative management. The results of an interview with informant NW, the principal of SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, stated that:

“The implementation of training for school administration staff, whether held by the school or attended by school administration staff externally, is based on the identification of relevant training needs. This identification is carried out using a number of methods, such as reviewing performance evaluation results, observing how daily tasks are carried out, and discussing them in internal meetings with administrative staff” (Interview, June 13, 2025).

This training focuses on improving understanding of regulations and mastery of information technology. This training covers strengthening understanding of digital technology and mastery of school administration management. This training is conducted as an effort to help School Administration Staff better understand administrative systems or digital technology. However, the distribution of training is not yet fully equitable.

Budget constraints mean that not all staff can participate in intensive capacity building activities. This has an impact on the varying levels of technology mastery among staff..

Providing Feedback

The principal implements a participatory approach and performance coaching. This approach allows the principal's leadership to receive feedback, which can be a crucial part of the process of coaching and improving the quality of human resources, particularly in the context of improving the quality of work in the school environment. Feedback not only serves as a form of appreciation or correction for work results, but also as a means to motivate, guide, and build professional awareness when carrying out administrative tasks in a more optimal, efficient, and responsible manner. The results of an interview with informant NW, principal of SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, stated:

“Feedback on the work results of each school administration staff is often provided for the purpose of guidance and competency improvement. This feedback can be delivered directly upon completion of the work, or through formal forums such as coordination meetings held periodically” (Interview, June 13, 2025).

Feedback is provided both formally and informally. Formal feedback is conveyed through evaluation meetings, while informal feedback is conveyed through direct discussions. This approach creates an atmosphere of open communication, although under certain conditions, high workloads can cause communication tensions..

Resource Development

In terms of facilities, the work facilities are relatively adequate, including computers, printers, filing cabinets, and well-organized workspaces. The comfortable working environment supports administrative effectiveness, but financial constraints are a major obstacle. The results of the researcher's interview with informant NW, the principal of SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, indicate that:

"Resources in the form of a budget to support the improvement of school administration staff competencies are available in the RAPBS, such as the implementation of IHT activities and participation in external training. The budget comes from the Education Unit Operational Assistance (BOSP) fund. Physical resources include work facilities that meet standards and provide comfort, such as organized workspaces, computer facilities, and other administrative equipment" (Interview, June 13, 2025).

The fulfillment of financial resources in the form of a special budget allocation for school administration staff and physical resources such as

supporting facilities and infrastructure, such as proper and representative workspaces, has been fulfilled in supporting the service process and school administration management by school administration staff. The same thing was conveyed by informant HP as the head of school administration staff at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, namely:

“The school has allocated a budget for improving school administration staff competency, but it is very minimal. The budget comes from Central School Operational Assistance funds. The work facilities and infrastructure meet standards and provide comfort at work, with organized workspaces, computer facilities, filing cabinets, and other administrative equipment” (Interview, June 16, 2025).

This situation limits opportunities for training and the procurement of more modern digital administration systems. The principal sees these limitations as structural constraints, while staff perceive them as barriers to self-development. This gap shows that external factors influence the effectiveness of transformational leadership.

Development of cooperation

Developing cooperation with educational institutions that focus on school administration, as well as with professional associations for administrative staff, is a strategic step that is urgently needed in order to support the improvement of the competence of School Administrative Staff. Through collaboration, schools gain broader access to structured, relevant education and training programs and professional development that are in line with the demands of contemporary administrative tasks. The results of an interview with NW, principal of SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, stated:

"The school has established cooperation with government institutions, particularly the Bengkulu Provincial Education and Culture Office, in order to strengthen school administrative staff competencies. This cooperation takes the form of training and coaching activities featuring professional and experienced speakers in the field of educational administration. In addition, school administrative staff also members of the school administrative staff community for communication and discussion forums among peers." (Interview, June 13, 2025)

This collaboration strengthens team cohesion and facilitates the completion of cross-departmental administrative tasks. However, external cooperation with other institutions is still limited to specific needs. Internal cooperation is going well, but external collaboration is still limited. The principal views collaboration as part of the organizational system, while staff feel the benefits more in terms of daily coordination.

School Culture Development

This collaboration strengthens team cohesion and facilitates the completion of cross-departmental administrative tasks. However, external cooperation with other institutions is still limited to specific needs. Internal cooperation is going well, but external collaboration is still limited. The principal views collaboration as part of the organizational system, while staff feel the benefits more in terms of daily coordination:

“The atmosphere and policies at school greatly influence the improvement of school administrative staff competencies, because a good working environment and supportive rules can make them more enthusiastic about learning and working.” (Interview, June 13, 2025).

The atmosphere and policies of a school are manifestations of the cultural development implemented in that school. The implementation of a good school culture can have a significant impact on the learning environment in schools, including on school administrative staff performance. Furthermore, informant NW, as the principal of SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, said:

“The steps taken to create a conducive school environment are to cultivate 6S in school services, namely smiles, greetings, courtesy, politeness, respect, and enthusiasm. It is hoped that by instilling these habits in the school community, there will be an impact on improving the competence of school administrative staff, teachers, and the quality of learning” (Interview, June 13, 2025).

In addition to the statements made by the informants, the researcher's observations also found that staff interactions with guests were polite and professional. This culture fosters strong social competence and service ethics. The principal interprets the 6S culture as an institutional identity, while the staff interpret it as a service standard. This reinforces the idealized influence dimension because leaders build collective values that are internalized in work practices.

School Administrative Staff Competencies

The results of the study show that the competence of School Administrative Staff at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan is in the good category, although there are still several aspects that need to be strengthened, especially in the technical dimension based on information technology. In general, the competencies possessed by school administrative staff include personality, social, technical, and managerial competencies (especially for the head of school administrative staff). In terms of personality, all informants demonstrated discipline, responsibility, and integrity in carrying out administrative tasks. The results of an interview with informant M, a school administrative staff 3 staff member at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, stated that:

“Honesty is instilled from within myself. When processing data, I ensure that the data I input or convey to my superiors is completely accurate and accountable. To instill honesty in the work team, I encourage transparent and open communication among team members.” (Interview, June 20, 2025).

This statement reflects professional awareness in carrying out the role of administrative staff. Observations also show that staff arrive on time, complete their assigned tasks, and maintain work ethics in the school environment. No significant differences in perception were found between the principal and staff regarding personality competencies; both view this aspect as the main strength of School Administrative Staff.

In terms of social competence, the ability to work together and communicate is considered quite good. The results of interviews with informant RF as school administrative staff 2 staff at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan said:

“As a school administrative staff, I have often worked in teams, such as conducting school exams and compiling annual reports. In a team, a school administrative staff can be a coordinator or a member, depending on the division of tasks agreed upon by the team.” (Interview, June 19, 2025)

This statement indicates cross-role collaboration in supporting smooth school administration. Interactions between administrative staff and teachers and students take place in a cooperative atmosphere, especially in the management of academic documents and student services. The principal views this cooperation as part of the organizational culture, while staff see it as a practical necessity to complete a fairly high workload. Thus, social competence is not only interpersonal but also functional in supporting organizational effectiveness.

In terms of technical competence, the findings show that, normatively, the capabilities of School Administrative Staff have been based on applicable regulations as stated in Permendiknas Number 24 of 2008. The technical abilities referred to include aspects of personnel, finance, infrastructure, public relations, correspondence and filing, student affairs, curriculum, and special services. However, there are variations in the mastery of information technology. Some staff have undergone ICT training and are able to operate digital administration systems, while others still need assistance, as found by the researcher from the information provided by HP as the head of school administrative staff at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, who said that:

“Of the 25 school administrative staff employees, around 15 are proficient in using Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Special service staff such as school guards and cleaners are unable to operate these computer applications” (Interview, June 20, 2025).

This difference indicates a gap in technical competence related to access to training and experience in using technological devices. Meanwhile, managerial competence is mainly reflected in the role of the Head of School Administration in coordinating administrative work. The researcher's interview with the informant HP as the Head of School Administration at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan explained that::

“In preparing the school administration work plan, I review the school calendar, the principal's work plan, and administrative needs. The preparation involves school administrative staff colleagues and coordination with the principal” (Interview, July 28, 2025).

The Head of school administrative staff plays a role in task distribution, internal supervision, and the preparation of periodic reports that form the basis for school evaluation. Perceptions of this managerial competency are relatively consistent among informants and are considered to support the stability and order of the school administration system.

Overall, the competencies of School Administrative Staff at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan show a fairly good balance in terms of personality and social aspects, as well as adequacy in technical and managerial aspects. However, strengthening technical competencies based on information technology remains a strategic need so that administrative services can be more adaptive to the demands of digitalization in education management. These findings indicate that improving the competence of School Administrative Staff does not only depend on individual capacity, but also on the support of training and sustainable development policies.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the principal of SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan plays a strategic role in shaping and improving the competence of Education Administration Personnel, although its implementation is inseparable from the contextual dynamics of the organization. The results of the study show that the leadership practices carried out are not only administrative in nature, but also contain a transformational dimension that is reflected in the development of vision, continuous supervision, the implementation of needs-based training, the provision of constructive feedback, the strengthening of work culture, and the development of cooperation.

However, the effectiveness of these practices is mediated by budget constraints, government regulations, and high administrative workloads. Therefore, this discussion section will interpret the research findings within the framework of transformational leadership theory and human resource-based

competency development, while comparing them with previous research results to emphasize the theoretical and practical contributions of this study in the context of vocational education.

Interpretation of Findings within a Theoretical Framework

The findings in this study indicate that the leadership practices of the principal at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan reflect the main characteristics of Transformational Leadership Theory, particularly in four main dimensions, namely idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. In the dimension of inspirational motivation, the principal actively formulates and internalizes the vision of administrative service. As shown in the results of interviews conducted by the researcher with informant NW as the principal of SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, namely:

“At SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, a specific vision and mission have been formulated to guide the implementation of school administrative services. The school administrative staff vision is to realize educational services that are innovative and equitable. When administrative staff have a complete and comprehensive understanding of this vision and mission, it will influence the way they work, encouraging the creation of a more structured, focused, and structured work pattern that focuses on improving service quality” (Interview, June 13, 2025).

The impact was also felt directly by educational administrators, as revealed in an interview with informant S, a school administrative staff 1 staff member at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, who said:

“At SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan, there is a specific vision and mission for school administrative staff. This vision and mission serve as work guidelines that provide clear direction for school administrative staff in carrying out their duties and responsibilities.” (Interview, June 18, 2025).

This finding reinforces Bass's argument that transformational leaders build a collective vision that gives meaning to work. However, this study also found that internalization of the vision is stronger at the structural level than individual reflective internalization. This is an important finding because it shows that transformational leadership does not automatically result in deep psychological commitment without a continuous dialogue process.

In the dimension of idealized influence, the direct supervision carried out by the principal showed real involvement in maintaining quality standards. The results of interviews conducted with informant NW as the principal of SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan were as follows:

“Supervision and evaluation of school administrative staff work is carried out regularly with the aim of assessing individual and team performance, developing school administrative staff competencies, enforcing discipline and work ethic, and improving administrative services. This supervision and evaluation cover various aspects such as individual performance, administrative systems, and the use of technology” (interview, June 13, 2025).

However, the supervisory approach is still predominantly administrative. This shows that transformational leadership in this context is still mixed with a transactional approach based on procedural control. In terms of intellectual stimulation, needs-based training has been implemented. The implementation of training for school administrative staff is based on the identification of training needs relevant to their respective tasks.

However, unexpected findings emerged regarding the gap in ICT proficiency. Of the 25 school administrative staff, only 15 were proficient in using computers for data management. This shows that the development strategy has not been fully able to overcome the digital capacity disparity. From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, this condition shows that training investment has not been evenly distributed and has not fully resulted in an increase in collective productivity.

Comparison with Previous Studies

These findings are consistent with research by Abunaser et al., (2025) which states that principals with a clear vision are able to improve administrative performance. Likewise, Utomo & Santosa, (2024) emphasizes the importance of transformational leadership in the context of vocational schools. However, unlike some studies that state that transformational leadership has a direct impact on performance improvement (Aldossari & Alanizan, 2025), This study shows that these effects are moderated by structural factors such as budget and regulations.

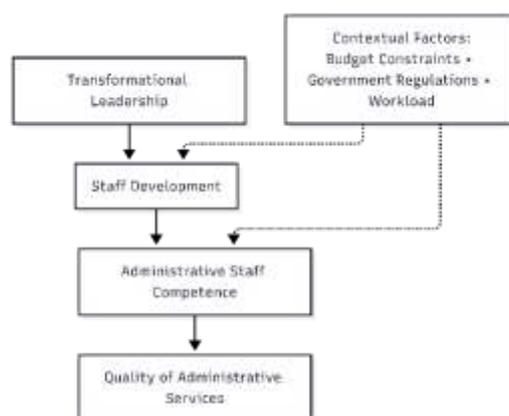
This finding reinforces the argument Saad Alessa, (2021) that the impact of transformational leadership is often indirect and mediated by the organizational context. Furthermore, the literature on instructional leadership Li et al., (2023) tend to neglect non-teaching staff. This study shows that strengthening leadership in the administrative sphere is an important factor in the effectiveness of Centers of Excellence vocational schools.

This study reveals several important findings beyond initial expectations. First, a school culture based on 6S values has proven to be more influential in strengthening social competencies than formal training. These values naturally shape a service ethos and work cohesion, indicating that competency

development is not only structural but also cultural. Second, although supervision is carried out routinely, the practice still tends to be administrative, so that the dimension of individualized consideration in transformational leadership is not yet fully optimal. Third, there is still a gap in information technology competencies among school administrative staff, even though the school has the status of a Center of Excellence Vocational School. This confirms that institutional status does not automatically guarantee equitable technical capacity. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the relevance of Transformational Leadership Theory, particularly in terms of inspirational motivation and idealized influence, but at the same time show that leadership effectiveness is mediated by structural factors such as budget constraints and regulations. Thus, the impact of leadership is contextual, not linear. These findings are also in line with Human Capital Theory, which emphasizes the importance of continuous investment in competency development as a prerequisite for improving organizational performance. In practical terms, the results of this study confirm the need for more reflective and dialogical supervision, equitable ICT-based training, and optimization of budget support and external collaboration networks.

This study is limited to one school and a relatively small number of participants, so the findings should be generalized with caution. Further research is recommended using a comparative design or mixed approach to test the relationship between transformational leadership and administrative staff competencies more broadly and measurably.

Figure. 2. Proposed Conceptual Model of Transformational Leadership and Administrative Staff Competence



This study confirms that the transformational leadership of school principals plays a strategic role in building the competence of school administrators through structured staff development mechanisms oriented toward capacity building. However, the effectiveness of such leadership does not stand independently but is influenced by contextual factors such as budget constraints, government regulations, and high administrative workloads.

These findings indicate that strengthening the competencies of school administrative staff is not merely a technical operational issue, but rather a strategic agenda in vocational education management reform. Therefore, a more systemic policy commitment is needed to ensure sustainable investment in administrative staff development, so that the quality of school administrative services can improve consistently and have a direct impact on the effectiveness of education delivery.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the leadership of the principal at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkulu Selatan played a significant role in improving the competence of School Administrative Staff through the application of seven aspects of influential leadership, namely vision development, supervision and evaluation, education and training, feedback, resource development, strengthening cooperation, and school culture development. In general, the competence of school administrative staff has met the standards set in Permendiknas Number 24 of 2008, especially in terms of personality, social, technical, and managerial aspects. However, there are still weaknesses in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in school administration management. In addition, this study also identified three main factors that hinder the optimization of school principal leadership in improving school administrative staff competency, namely internal communication problems that cause miscommunication, limited budget support for professional development, and regulations and policies that limit the flexibility of school administrative human resource management. These findings confirm that improving school administrative staff competency is not merely a technical administrative issue, but rather the result of a planned and sustainable strategic leadership process.

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes a theoretical contribution by expanding the study of educational leadership, particularly by placing school administrators as strategic subjects in the discourse of principal leadership. Until now, the literature on educational leadership in Indonesia has focused more on improving teacher competence and student academic achievement. This study presents a more

holistic perspective by showing that principal leadership also has direct implications for administrative capacity as the backbone of school management.

Conceptually, this study reinforces the transformational and distributive leadership approaches in the context of vocational school management, where principals act not only as administrators but also as agents of change who build a comprehensive organizational capacity-building system. Thus, this study expands the school leadership paradigm from an academic orientation to an academic-administrative integration as a unified education quality system.

Practical Implications for Practitioners

For school principals and education practitioners, this study confirms that investing in school administrative staff development is a managerial strategy that has a direct impact on the quality of educational services. School principals need to:

1. Integrate the school administrative staff competency improvement program into the school's annual work plan.
2. Develop needs-based training, particularly in digital literacy and technology-based administrative management.
3. Build a more systematic and documented internal communication system to minimize miscommunication.
4. Promote a professional work culture that is adaptive to regulatory changes and the demands of education digitization.

The key message for practitioners is that the quality of administrative services determines the operational efficiency of schools, and operational efficiency is the foundation of overall educational quality.

Policy Recommendations

In terms of policy, this study shows the need for stronger structural support for the development of school administrative personnel, especially in vocational schools. Local and central governments need to:

1. Provide a special funding scheme for improving school administrative staff competencies.
2. Provide policy flexibility in the management of administrative personnel, particularly in relation to recruitment and qualification improvement.
3. Integrate school administrative staff development into the national program for improving the quality of vocational education.

4. Develop minimum digital competency standards for school administrative personnel in response to the digital transformation of education.

These implications are highly relevant in the context of strengthening vocational education in Indonesia, which requires professional, accountable, and technology-based governance.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted in only one school, so the generalizability of the findings is still limited. Second, the qualitative approach used focused on in-depth exploration, but did not quantitatively measure the level of influence of each aspect of leadership on the improvement of school administrative staff competencies. Third, the dynamics of national policies that continue to change may affect the long-term relevance of some of the findings. These limitations open up opportunities for further research using a comparative design or mixed methods approach to strengthen the external validity of the findings.

Future Research Directions

Further research is recommended to:

1. Involve several vocational schools with different characteristics to obtain a comparative picture
2. Test the principal leadership model and its quantitative influence on school administrative staff competencies.
3. Examine the relationship between school administrative staff competencies and public service satisfaction and school image.
4. Explore the impact of school administration digitization on the effectiveness of vocational education management.
5. A longitudinal approach is also important to observe the sustainability of leadership's impact on the transformation of school organizational culture.

Ultimately, this study confirms that school administrators are not merely complementary to the education system, but rather a managerial foundation that determines the sustainability of school quality. In the context of Indonesian vocational education, which is moving towards strengthening quality and industry relevance, investing in the development of administrative staff is a strategic investment for the competitiveness of educational institutions. Visionary, inclusive, and organization-capacity-building-oriented school leadership will be key to ensuring that schools are not only academically excellent but also strong in governance and service delivery. Therefore, the

development of school administrative staff competencies must be prioritized in the national education quality development agenda.

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