

Humanist Leadership of the Principal in Improving Teachers' Teaching Motivation at Muhammadiyah Pucang Gading Middle School

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the principal's humanistic leadership in enhancing teachers' teaching motivation at SMP Muhammadiyah Pucang Gading. It is grounded in the complexity of educational systems, where low teacher motivation is often linked to bureaucratic leadership styles, excessive workload, limited appreciation, and insufficient emotional support. Although prior studies confirm the importance of effective leadership, research focusing on humanistic leadership—emphasizing empathy, fairness, individual development, and positive relationships—remains limited, particularly in Islamic-based secondary schools in Indonesia. This research aims to analyze how humanistic leadership contributes to improving teaching motivation and to identify its key dimensions, including empathy, participatory communication, and professional support. A qualitative field study approach was employed, involving purposively selected participants such as the principal, vice principals, teachers, and staff. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using interactive techniques with triangulation and member checking to ensure validity. The findings reveal that humanistic leadership has been positively implemented through empathetic practices, open two-way communication, professional development support, and a harmonious organizational culture, significantly enhancing teacher motivation. However, challenges remain, including inconsistent communication, administrative burdens, individual resistance, and limited facilities. Overall, this approach effectively fosters a supportive work environment and teachers' psychological well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a complex and dynamic system, the success of which is heavily influenced by various components, one of which is leadership within the educational unit. As a leader, the principal plays a strategic role in determining policy direction, building organizational culture, and creating a conducive learning climate for teachers and students. In the context of 21st-century education, characterized by rapid change and demands for global competency, the principal is required not only to be an administrator but also a transformational leader capable of inspiring and empowering the

entire school community. Research over the past five years has shown that principal leadership is significantly related to improvements in educational quality, both in terms of teacher performance and student learning outcomes (Hendriyati & Somantri, 2021; Aprilia, 2023; Hallinger, 2020). Furthermore, a study by Leithwood et al. (2020) confirmed that school leadership is the second most important factor influencing student learning success after teacher quality. Therefore, the effectiveness of principal leadership is a key factor in efforts to continuously improve educational quality.

Teacher motivation is a crucial aspect that significantly determines the quality of the classroom learning process. Highly motivated teachers tend to demonstrate more optimal performance, have a strong professional commitment, and are able to create innovative, student-centered learning. Motivation is influenced not only by internal factors such as passion and job satisfaction, but also by external factors such as the work environment, organizational support, and the principal's leadership style. Recent research shows a strong relationship between principal leadership and teacher motivation, where supportive, participatory, and communicative leadership can significantly improve teacher morale (Ratnasari et al., 2022; Toropova et al., 2021). Furthermore, research by Novita et al. (2024) also revealed that principals who are able to provide emotional support and appreciation for teacher performance will positively impact their intrinsic motivation. This demonstrates that principals play a crucial role not only as administrative managers but also as motivators and facilitators in improving the quality of human resources in schools.

Although the importance of teacher motivation has been widely recognized, in practice, various problems related to low teacher motivation still exist. Several contributing factors include high workloads, a lack of recognition for performance, and a leadership style that neglects human aspects. Many principals still employ an administrative and bureaucratic leadership approach, thus providing little room for teachers to develop optimally. This can lead to less harmonious working relationships and decreased teacher morale. Research by Kim & Beehr (2020) shows that an unsupportive work environment can reduce teacher motivation and increase work stress. Furthermore, a study by Collie (2021) revealed that a lack of support from school leaders contributes to low teacher engagement and job satisfaction. If not addressed seriously, this issue can impact the quality of learning and student learning outcomes.

To address these issues, a humanistic leadership approach is a relevant solution in the context of modern education. Humanistic leadership emphasizes human values such as empathy, respect for the individual, justice, and the development of holistic human potential. In this approach, the principal acts not only as a decision-maker but also as a mentor, listener, and partner for teachers. Research over the past five years has shown that leadership oriented toward humanistic values can create a more conducive work environment and improve teacher psychological well-being (Mansir, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Furthermore, research by Novita et al. (2024) found that principals with high emotional intelligence and the ability to build positive interpersonal relationships can significantly improve teacher motivation and performance. Thus, the implementation of humanistic leadership not only impacts teacher motivation but also creates a more inclusive and harmonious school culture.

This research was conducted at Muhammadiyah Pucang Gading Junior High School, a religious-based educational institution committed to improving the quality of education. As a growing school, Muhammadiyah Pucang Gading Junior High School faces various challenges in optimizing teacher performance, particularly in terms of teaching motivation. This situation makes the school a relevant location to examine how principal leadership can contribute to improving teacher motivation. Furthermore, the school's Islamic-based characteristics also provide an interesting context for examining the implementation of humanist leadership aligned with moral and spiritual values.

Although various studies have examined the relationship between principal leadership and teacher work motivation, there are still limitations in studies specifically highlighting the implementation of humanist leadership in the context of secondary education, particularly in religious schools. Most studies focus on transformational or instructional leadership, while the humanist approach has received relatively little attention in empirical research. Studies by Wang et al. (2021) and Toropova et al. (2021) do demonstrate the importance of well-being and emotional

support in leadership, but they have not specifically examined the concept of humanist leadership in depth in the local Indonesian context. Therefore, there is a research gap that needs to be filled through more contextual and in-depth studies on how humanist leadership is implemented by principals and its impact on teacher teaching motivation.

Based on the above description, this study aims to analyze and describe in depth how the principal's humanistic leadership can contribute to increasing teacher motivation at Muhammadiyah Pucang Gading Junior High School. This research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of educational administration, particularly regarding humanistic leadership, as well as provide practical assistance to principals in developing more effective leadership strategies oriented toward humanitarian values. Furthermore, the results of this study are also expected to serve as a reference for future research examining similar topics in different contexts.

IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

Research is a systematic process undertaken to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon through structured scientific procedures (Moleong, 2021). This study employed a qualitative approach with a field study, as it aimed to deeply understand the phenomenon of humanistic leadership by school principals in the real context of the school environment (Fadli, 2021). A qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of research subjects holistically and contextually (Sidiq & Choiri, 2019). The study was conducted at Muhammadiyah Pucang Gading Junior High School, located in Demak Regency, Central Java, as a location relevant to the focus of educational leadership studies. The research subjects consisted of the principal, vice principal for curriculum, vice principal for student affairs, teachers, and educational staff, who were selected purposively based on their involvement in the leadership and learning process (Fadli, 2021). Data collection techniques were carried out through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, which are the main techniques in qualitative research to obtain rich and in-depth data (Yusuf et al., 2020). Observations were conducted to directly observe the principal's leadership practices, while interviews were used to gather information from informants regarding their perceptions and experiences. Documentation was used to supplement the data in the form of archives, photographs, and other supporting documents (Fadli, 2021).

Data analysis in this study was conducted interactively through the stages of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification, as developed in the qualitative data analysis model (Miles et al., 2020). Data reduction was carried out by simplifying and focusing data relevant to the research objectives, while data presentation was done in descriptive narrative form for ease of understanding (Yusuf et al., 2020). Conclusions were drawn in stages, considering the consistency of data obtained from various sources. To ensure data validity, this study employed triangulation techniques, both source triangulation and technical triangulation, by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation (Anwar & Alfina, 2019). Furthermore, data validity was strengthened through member checks to ensure data conformity with actual conditions in the field (Valen & Satria, 2021). Therefore, this research method is expected to produce valid, credible, and scientifically accountable findings in the study of humanistic leadership of school principals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Implementation of Humanistic Leadership by the Principal

Based on data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation, it was found that the leadership of the principal at SMP Muhammadiyah Pucang Gading, as a whole, aligns with humanistic leadership practices. Humanistic leadership, in this case, is demonstrated through an orientation toward humanitarian values, such as empathy, respect for individuals, good communication, and support for teacher professional development.

The principal also views teachers as more than just resources within the organization. Rather, he views teachers as whole human beings with emotional, social, and professional needs. This is evident in leadership practices that prioritize polite communication, openness, and a willingness to listen to teachers' aspirations. These findings align with research by Hauseman et al. (2023), which demonstrates that leadership focused on individual well-being can create a conducive work atmosphere and environment.

Furthermore, the principal can also implement a participatory approach to decision-making through meetings or deliberations, demonstrating appreciation for teachers' contributions to the school organization. These practices reflect humanistic leadership, which places interpersonal relationships as the primary foundation for building organizational culture (Mutaqin, 2026).

Interview results also revealed that the implementation of humanistic leadership is not yet fully consistent. Informants also revealed some minor obstacles in communication, such as miscommunication and a lack of clarity in conveying information from superiors to subordinates. This indicates that even though humanistic values have been implemented, strengthening communication within the organization is still necessary to maintain effectiveness and order. This aligns with research by Collie (2021), which explains that the quality of communication in leadership significantly influences the effectiveness of the work environment and the well-being of educators. Therefore, it can be concluded that the principal's leadership is already moving toward a more humanistic approach, but still requires optimization, particularly in the areas of communication and consistency.

2. The Empathy Dimension in Humanistic Leadership

Empathy is a key and important indicator of humanistic leadership. According to research, the principal has demonstrated empathy by paying attention to the personal circumstances of teachers, providing solutions to problems, and providing moral support in various situations. Most informants stated that the principal also cares about the well-being of teachers, both professionally and personally. Practices such as inquiring about teachers' conditions, providing some leniency in certain situations, and helping to provide solutions to problems faced by teachers also demonstrate a humanistic approach taken by the principal.

These findings align with research by Candra et al. (2026), which found that emotional intelligence and empathy in principals positively impact teacher motivation. Furthermore, Toropova et al. (2021) also demonstrated that emotional support from leaders leads to teacher satisfaction and improved performance within the organization.

However, there were also differing opinions among informants. Several informants reported that the principal's empathy was inconsistent, particularly in terms of intensive communication and clear coordination. This demonstrates that empathy cannot simply be expressed through attitude; it also requires effective communication skills in conveying information, attention, and concern for others. With this in mind, it can be said that the four main dimensions of empathy in the principal's leadership have shown good things, but there are still several things that need to be improved in terms of consistency so that they can be felt equally by all teachers and other school staff.

3. Communication and Work Relationships

Communication is also crucial in humanistic leadership, as it serves as the primary foundation for building strong and harmonious working relationships. Research shows that communication between principals and teachers generally occurs well, characterized by openness, two-way communication, and opportunities for all teachers to express their opinions and innovations for the school.

Several informants also explained that they felt more heard in their communications with the principal. This indicates recognition of the role and contribution of teachers within the school organization, a key principle of humanistic leadership.

This finding aligns with Leithwood et al. (2020), who explain that effective leadership is leadership that builds positive and positive interpersonal relationships through open communication. This suggests that even well-functioning communication with subordinates still requires a structured communication system. Research by Kim & Beehr (2023) also shows that ineffective communication impacts performance and can lead to excessive work stress. In this way, the principal's communication demonstrates a humanistic character, but communication still needs to be strengthened to become more systematic.

4. Support for Learning Activities and Professional Development

Support for learning activities is a concrete form of humanistic leadership. Research shows that principals can provide significant support for the learning process, including providing facilities, mentoring, and providing solutions for teachers facing challenges. Principals also provide opportunities for teachers to develop their competencies through various channels, such as MGMP (Student Groups), workshops, extracurricular training, and further study. This demonstrates a commitment to continuous professional development.

Furthermore, non-financial support, such as a conducive and fair work environment and harmonious co-worker relationships, is also a key factor in increasing teacher motivation. Hauseman et al. (2023) explain that a supportive work environment can improve psychological well-being and improve teacher performance. Therefore, the principal's support for learning activities and teachers demonstrates effective humanistic leadership practices.

5. Teachers' Teaching Motivation from a Humanistic Leadership Perspective

Teachers' motivation for teaching is the primary focus of this study. Based on interview data, the level of motivation of teachers at Muhammadiyah Pucang Gading Junior High School is considered good, although there is some variation between individuals. However, most informants stated that the principal significantly influences teacher motivation, particularly in terms of providing appreciation, moral support, providing solutions to problems, and creating a conducive work environment. This finding aligns with research by Ardimi (2024), which shows that principal leadership is related to teacher motivation in schools.

However, some informants also stated that teaching motivation is influenced by internal and external factors beyond principal leadership, including student conditions and personal experiences. This indicates that teacher motivation is more complex and multidimensional. Toropova et al. (2021) also explained that teacher motivation is influenced by various factors, such as work environment conditions, characteristics, and support from colleagues. Thus, humanistic leadership can play a role in increasing teacher motivation, but is not the main or determining factor.

6. Obstacles to the Implementation of Humanistic Leadership

In its implementation, humanistic leadership is also not without its challenges. Based on interviews, several obstacles exist, such as resistance from some teachers, the persistently high administrative burden on the principal, limited infrastructure, and the challenge of balancing a humanistic approach with academic demands. This indicates that its implementation still requires ongoing adaptation, particularly in dealing with individual (teacher) dynamics. This aligns with Collie's (2021) opinion, which explains that work pressure and administrative demands can impact leadership effectiveness and teacher well-being. To overcome these obstacles, principals can also implement various strategies, such as clear and targeted supervision, open communication, and adequate use of technology in coordinating work systems.

7. Synthesis of Research Findings

Overall, this study found that humanistic leadership has positive and significant results in increasing teacher motivation at Muhammadiyah Pucang Gading Middle School. Leadership practices oriented toward empathy, communication, support, and appreciation have been proven to foster a conducive, honest, and open work environment and boost teacher morale. However, the effectiveness of humanistic leadership is also influenced by implementation, communication quality, and the ability to adapt to the organization.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the humanistic leadership of the principal at Muhammadiyah Pucang Gading Junior High School has shown positive results through an emphasis on empathy, open communication, and support for teacher professional development, which has resulted in a conducive work climate and increased teaching motivation. However, analytically, its effectiveness is not yet fully optimal due to persistent inconsistencies in implementation and weaknesses in the organizational communication system, reflecting a gap between idealized humanistic values and actual practice. Furthermore, the multidimensional nature of teacher motivation confirms that humanistic leadership is not the sole determining factor but needs to be integrated with adaptive and systematic managerial strategies. Therefore, strengthening leadership consistency, improving communication quality, and enhancing the principal's adaptive capacity are key to ensuring a more effective and sustainable humanistic approach in improving educational quality.

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