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## Organizational Culture as A Determinant of Effective Leadership in Elementary Schools

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### ABSTRACT

#### Background

In Indonesia, only 58% of principals meet managerial competency standards, fostering a supportive culture is essential to bridge leadership gaps and align with national education goals.

#### Purpose

This study explores how organizational culture enhances the performance effectiveness of elementary school principals, focusing on core values like collaboration, innovation, and inclusivity.

#### Design/method/approach

A qualitative case study design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews involving principals and teachers from diverse elementary schools. Purposive sampling ensured representation of urban and rural contexts. Thematic analysis identified patterns in cultural practices and their impact on leadership effectiveness.

#### Results

Organizational culture, characterized by trust and shared decision-making, plays a crucial role in enhancing principal performance by fostering motivation and minimizing resistance to change. In this context, principals function as “cultural architects,” employing transformational leadership practices such as mentoring and participatory meetings—to instill and strengthen core values within the school environment. However, contextual challenges, including resource disparities, demand adaptive cultural strategies, particularly in rural schools where emphasizing mutual cooperation becomes essential for sustaining progress and achieving shared goals.

#### Contribution/value

The study contributes by highlighting how organizational culture grounded in trust and shared decision-making significantly enhances principal performance through transformational leadership practices.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Basic education serves as the primary foundation for developing quality human resources. In Indonesian, elementary school, as the beginning of formal education, require effective leadership from school principal (Ali & Susilawati, 2025; Sunaengsih et al., 2019). However, the effectiveness of principal's performance is closely linked to the influence of the organizational culture that exists within the school environment (Suhaeni, 2023). According to data from the Ministry of Education, only 58% of elementary school principals in Indonesia meet the required managerial competency standards. This highlights the need to adopt an organizational culture approach to enhance educational leadership performance (Samsu, 2022). Indonesian education system, regulated by Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, emphasizes the importance of school-based management as a strategy for improving school autonomy and performance (Tampubolon et al., 2022). Within this framework, organizational culture acts as a set of shared values that shapes the behavior and decision-making of all school members.

Schein (2010) defined organizational culture as a pattern of basic assumptions developed by a group in response to external and internal challenges, which over time becomes a guide for behavior (Khairunnisa et al., 2024; Lase et al., 2025). In elementary school settings, organizational culture manifests in core values such as discipline, collaboration, and learning innovation, which are internalized by all stakeholders (Saparuddin & Sidik, 2024; Victorynie & Sabeni, 2025; Warter, 2019).

Some previous research indicated that organizational culture contributed as much as 72.1% to employee performance in the public sector (Al-Alawi et al., 2007; Iskamto, 2023; Roby Hadi Putra, 2022). This substantial impact underscores the relevance of organizational culture in the educational context, particularly in school (González Cardona et al., 2023; Shayya, 2018). For school principal, cultivating a strong organizational culture is essential to foster a work environment that aligns with and supports the achievement of the school's vision and mission. A values-based culture can drive collective behavior, improve staff performance, and ultimately enhance overall school effectiveness.

The effectiveness of principal's performance can be assessed based on Minister of National Education Regulation Number 13 of 2007, which outlines four key dimensions: (1) instructional leadership; (2) curriculum development; (3) resource management; and (4) educational supervision. The successful implementation of these dimensions is significantly influenced by the organizational culture that develops within the school environment (Muljono & Sa'ud, 2015). A strong, supportive culture can enhance a principal's ability to lead effectively, manage resources, and improve instructional quality.

One of the main challenges in strengthening school leadership lies in the heterogeneity of school characteristics across Indonesia. Data from BPS in 2021 highlighted significant disparities between urban and rural elementary schools, particularly in terms of infrastructure quality and teacher qualifications (Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025; Nugroho et al., 2023). A comparative study by the Center for Research and Development of the Ministry of Education and Culture further revealed differences in how organizational culture was implemented: principals in underdeveloped areas tended to prioritize mutual cooperation,

whereas those in urban areas focused more on technological innovation. Additionally, data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology showed that 63% of school principals encountered obstacles in fostering an effective organizational culture. The primary challenges included: 1) teachers' resistance to change; 2) limited resources; and 3) an excessive administrative workload. Notably, only 38% of principals regularly evaluated their organizational culture, indicating a gap in reflective leadership practices (Yusutria et al., 2022).

Theoretically, the relationship between organizational culture and performance effectiveness can be understood through Fiedler's Contingency Leadership Theory (1967), which emphasizes the alignment between leadership style and the organizational context (Anatan, 2011). In the context of elementary school, for instance, institution with a high proportion of senior teachers may benefit more from a collaborative culture, whereas those with predominantly younger teachers may be better suited to a dynamic and adaptive culture (Mangkunegara, 2013).

This study is significant in addressing three key academic gaps: 1) the limited research on organizational culture within the elementary school setting; 2) the need for a context-specific model of organizational culture development in school, and 3) the lack of empirical evidence on how organizational culture influences principal performance (Widodo, 2015). The findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically, particularly as a reference for formulating policies aimed at strengthening the leadership capacity of school principals.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that influence how members of an organization behave and interact. Schein (2010) defines it as the underlying assumptions learned by a group to address internal and external challenges, shaping how members perceive and respond to their environment (Akpa et al., 2021; Coghlan, 2024). Denison (1990) highlights culture as the collective norms and values that guide behavior, while Cameron and Quinn (2011) emphasize its role in influencing employees' thoughts, feelings, and actions (Alberto Núñez Ramírez et al., 2017). Hofstede (1991) describes organizational culture as the collective mental programming that distinguishes one organization from another, and Robbins and Judge (2013) define it as a system of shared meaning that forms the organization's unique identity (Akpa et al., 2021). Suharto (2018) add that organizational culture must incorporate local values such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and *kekeluargaan* (family-like relationships), which play a vital role in strengthening collaboration and commitment within schools (Aranki et al., 2019; Šostar & Ristanović, 2023).

These cultural elements directly affect how an organization functions on a day-to-day basis. For example, a school with a culture that prioritizes collaboration and innovation encourages teachers to share ideas and try new teaching methods, leading to continuous improvement in student learning (Pabalan et al., 2020). Conversely, an organization with a more hierarchical and rigid culture may emphasize strict adherence to rules and formal

procedures, limiting flexibility but ensuring consistency and control. Widodo (2020) explained that organizational culture often reflects communal values that influence leadership styles, promoting participative and inclusive decision-making (Ginting et al., 2024; Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023). Thus, organizational culture serves as an invisible framework that guides decision-making, communication, and behavior, shaping both individual performance and overall.

Teacher's performance refers to the effectiveness with which teacher carry out his/her roles in facilitating student learning, managing classrooms, and contributing to school development. Guskey (2000) defined teacher performance as a multidimensional concept that includes instructional skills, classroom management, assessment techniques, and fostering a positive learning environment (Thapa et al., 2016). Santoso (2019) emphasized that teachers' performance is evaluated based on competencies outlined in Teacher Law No. 14/2005, which includes pedagogical skills, professionalism, personality, and social interaction (Fitriyah et al., 2025). Effective teachers demonstrate not only mastery of subject matter but also the ability to motivate students, adapt to diverse learning needs, and participate actively in school activities.

For example, a teacher who employs varied teaching strategies—such as integrating technology, group discussions, and project-based learning—exemplifies high performance by engaging students and improving learning outcomes. In contrast, a teacher who relies solely on traditional lectures and struggles with classroom discipline may be seen as underperforming. Stronge (2018) found that teacher who engages in continuous professional development and reflective practice tends to show improved performance, which correlates strongly with student achievement (Padillo et al., 2021). Research showed that teacher who participates in training programs on innovative teaching methods and classroom management significantly enhance his/her instructional effectiveness and student engagement.

Thus, teacher' performance is a dynamic construct influenced by knowledge, skills, attitudes, and ongoing professional growth. It is crucial not only for student success but also for fostering a positive school culture and achieving educational goals.

## **METHOD**

The study adopted a qualitative case study design to provide an in-depth exploration of leadership practices within elementary schools situated in both urban and rural settings. A case study approach was chosen because it allows researchers to examine contemporary phenomena in their real-life contexts and to capture the complexity of social and cultural dynamics (Yin, 2018). Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers, enabling the collection of detailed and context-rich insights while offering participants the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences. To ensure diversity and relevance, purposive sampling was employed, as this technique is particularly effective for selecting participants who can provide meaningful information aligned with the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The analysis process applied thematic analysis, a method that facilitates the identification, organization, and interpretation of patterns across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This systematic approach involved coding the interview transcripts, clustering categories, and deriving themes that highlighted the interplay between cultural practices and leadership effectiveness. By employing thematic analysis, the study was able to uncover both shared and context-specific insights, demonstrating how cultural factors shape leadership differently in urban and rural school environments. The integration of purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis not only strengthened the methodological rigor but also enhanced the trustworthiness and validity of the findings through triangulation and systematic interpretation.

## **RESULTS**

The research conducted with elementary school teachers revealed several key organizational cultural values that shape school practices and leadership:

Informant 1: emphasized the core values of honesty, discipline, and responsibility, which are deeply embedded in the school's daily routines. The school also promotes innovation in teaching methods, aiming to center all policies and activities around student learning needs. According to the informant, these values are essential in ensuring that each student grows both academically and in character, in line with their individual potential.

Informant 2: highlighted the importance of collaboration among teachers and staff. Collaborative practices are used to enhance professional competencies based on each individual's area of expertise. This ongoing capacity-building effort is seen as essential to maintaining continuity and quality in learning, and fosters a mutually supportive work environment within the school.

Informant 3: described the school's strong commitment to tolerance and inclusion, aligning with national laws and principles of non-discrimination. The school community encourages active participation in cultural activities, regardless of students' or staff members' backgrounds. This approach is rooted in a belief that the state guarantees the right to equal participation, thereby reinforcing an environment of respect and diversity.

Based on the interviews with Informants 1, 2, and 3, several key values and practices emerged that define the organizational culture of the school. These findings indicate that the school's culture is grounded in principles such as student-centeredness, collaboration, integrity, innovation, inclusivity, openness, and servant leadership. Rather than focusing solely on academic achievement, the school actively fosters an environment that supports both the holistic development of students and the professional growth of teachers. By prioritizing students in every policy decision, promoting teamwork among staff, and embracing innovation in teaching, the school has cultivated a dynamic and sustainable learning climate. Furthermore, values such as honesty, discipline, and responsibility function as ethical guidelines for all school members. Meanwhile, the principles of inclusivity and open dialogue help ensure that every voice within the school community is heard, respected,

and valued. This collective commitment to shared values forms the foundation for effective leadership and long-term institutional growth.

The principal plays a pivotal role in cultivating and sustaining the school's organizational culture through the practice of servant leadership. In this model, the principal not only leads but also listens, guides, and facilitates the professional and personal needs of teachers and staff. This leadership approach fosters a sense of mutual trust and collective responsibility, enabling all members of the school community to actively contribute to the shared vision of quality education.

The strength of this organizational culture extends beyond staff relationships; it significantly enhances teacher effectiveness and contributes to the development of a positive, inclusive learning environment for students. Within such a setting, students feel accepted, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential. This case illustrates how shared values, when embedded in daily practice, can serve as a powerful driver of educational success and institutional sustainability.

The interview responses to the second research question—regarding practices that support the development and reinforcement of organizational culture in elementary schools—revealed several important mechanisms at work.

Informant 1: highlighted the role of monthly evaluation meetings as a key cultural practice. These meetings, led by the principal, are characterized by a participatory leadership style in which teachers are encouraged to voice their ideas and opinions, even on significant policy matters such as adjusting school hours. This inclusive approach makes teachers feel respected and valued, reinforcing a culture of openness and shared decision-making.

Informants 2 and 3: emphasized the importance of a mentoring system for new teachers. In their school, newly recruited teachers are paired with an experienced mentor for the first six months. This practice not only facilitates their professional adaptation but also ensures that they internalize the school's unwritten cultural norms and values. Through this mentoring process, the school actively preserves and transmits its organizational culture to new members, strengthening cultural continuity.

Based on the practices described by the informants, it is evident that the school has successfully fostered a strong participatory and collaborative organizational culture through both formal mechanisms—such as inclusive evaluation meetings—and informal mechanisms, including mentoring programs for new teachers. These practices reflect a clear commitment to cultivating a supportive professional environment that values individual contributions and promotes collective growth. The principal serves as a central catalyst in this cultural development by implementing open and inclusive policies, offering personal recognition, and providing tangible support to teachers. This leadership approach not only reinforces a sense of ownership and engagement among staff but also establishes an effective feedback loop that supports ongoing reflection and continuous improvement within the school community.

Consistency plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of organizational values, extending from policy decisions to everyday practices such as joint cleaning activities. This alignment between values and actions reflects a culture that is not only articulated at the strategic level but also embodied in the school's daily routines. The holistic mentoring approach adopted for new teachers ensures that these values are effectively transmitted and internalized, facilitating cultural continuity. The integration of formal structures (such as mentoring and evaluation systems) with informal practices (such as collaborative activities) fosters a shared commitment in which organizational values are not merely slogans but lived experiences that guide behavior across the school community. As a result, the organizational culture in this school functions as a driving force—reinforcing both collective effectiveness and individual performance, while sustaining a positive and cohesive educational environment.

In response to the question concerning the principal's role in building and maintaining organizational culture, the interview results reveal consistent leadership practices that promote trust, inclusion, and professional growth.

Informant 1: emphasized the principal's role in fostering a culture of trust and autonomy. Teachers are given the freedom to innovate—particularly in developing learning media—without being constrained by excessive bureaucracy. The only expectation is that they share their outcomes during monthly community of practice sessions, which reinforces professional accountability while maintaining creative freedom.

Informant 2: highlighted the principal's daily habit of greeting students with a high-five at the school gate, a simple yet powerful gesture that cultivates a family-like atmosphere. This personal connection sets a tone of warmth and approachability, which teachers naturally extend into their own relationships with students, strengthening the school's communal ethos.

Informant 3: pointed to the principal's strategic allocation of resources to support teacher development. Specifically, the principal consistently reserves 20% of BOS (Bantuan Operasional Sekolah – School Operational Assistance) funds for capacity-building. In the current academic year, this has enabled teachers to receive specialized training in mentoring children with special needs, delivered by experts rather than through generic seminars. Moreover, regular staff meetings have been transformed from routine information-sharing sessions into collaborative problem-solving forums, encouraging teacher voice and shared ownership of school improvement.

Based on the various good practices identified, it is evident that the principal functions as a cultural architect, intentionally shaping an educational environment rooted in trust, support, and sustainable growth. Through a transformational leadership approach, the principal establishes concrete mechanisms such as a dedicated teacher development fund, a collaborative problem-solving forum, and a participatory feedback culture. Simple yet meaningful actions—such as warm morning greetings and supportive communication styles (e.g., “How can I help?”)—serve as everyday practices that reinforce a strong, family-oriented school culture. These values are maintained consistently through initiatives like a

cultural orientation program for new teachers, ensuring the transmission and preservation of the school's core values across generations. Such leadership not only fosters a sense of belonging and shared purpose but also contributes to the creation of a dynamic learning ecosystem—one in which teachers are empowered to innovate without the constraints of excessive bureaucracy. This balance of structure and freedom enables sustained professional growth and strengthens the overall effectiveness of the school community.

The informants' responses highlighted the significant influence of organizational culture on the principal's performance in leading the school.

Informant 1: described the school's culture as collegial, emphasizing a shared commitment between teachers and the principal to create a learning environment that is focused, innovative, and collaborative. This culture facilitates joint efforts in achieving educational goals and continuous improvement.

Informant 2: pointed out that a strengthened organizational culture enables the principal to more effectively guide the school toward its vision. The deeply embedded culture of empathy among staff further supports the principal in implementing new policies smoothly, fostering an environment receptive to change.

Informant 3: highlighted the presence of a religious cultural foundation within the school, which instils a strong awareness of rules and ethical standards among staff.

This shared cultural value reduces the supervisory burden on the principal while still maintaining necessary control and accountability within the school community.

The influence of organizational culture is evident in its strategic role in shaping the effectiveness of principal leadership. A positive and well-reinforced culture—characterized by collegiality, empathy, meritocracy, and religious values—creates an environment that enables principals to optimally allocate their time and energy toward instructional leadership and the development of a long-term vision for the school.

The interview responses highlight how organizational culture significantly shapes the principal's decision-making processes and actions within the school.

Informant 1: emphasized the principal's collaborative approach in selecting new textbooks, involving representatives from each class in the decision-making process. This practice reflects a school culture that values collaboration and collective input.

Informant 2: noted that the principal consistently involves teachers when making decisions about tutoring and other academic matters, ensuring that actions align with the organization's core values and culture. This collaborative decision-making has led to the optimization of a free mentoring program conducted by senior teachers to support students who are academically behind.

Informant 3: described how the principal provides direct support to teachers facing challenges by organizing sharing sessions, where teachers collectively discuss and devise solutions. This participatory approach underscores a culture of mutual support and problem-solving.

Based on the various case studies presented, it is evident that principals consistently practice values-based leadership aligned with the established organizational culture. This approach not only facilitates the generation of solutions that are widely accepted by all

stakeholders but also strengthens social cohesion within the school community. A clear pattern emerges of adaptive and contextual leadership that consciously rejects one-size-fits-all solutions. Principals demonstrate the capacity to tailor their responses to the specific needs and circumstances of their schools—whether by simplifying evaluation systems for new teachers, adjusting full-day school policies based on empirical data, or leveraging community radio to enhance communication in remote areas. This flexibility is underpinned by a robust organizational culture that functions both as a moral compass and a framework for innovation. Consequently, the educational environment created is not only operationally effective but also culturally responsive, meeting the unique needs of both the school and its surrounding community.

## **DISCUSSION**

Organizational culture plays a pivotal role in enhancing the effectiveness of elementary school principals. Research by Ni Luh Ayu Manik Pratiwi (2021) demonstrated that a strong school culture fosters motivation, commitment, and loyalty among all members of the school community, thereby supporting the achievement of educational goals (Luh et al., 2021). A healthy, dynamic, and professional school culture not only improves overall school quality but also boosts the performance of both teachers and principals. Within this context, the principal, as the highest-ranking leader in the school, must cultivate a collaborative and inclusive organizational culture that positively influences the performance of all school stakeholders.

Furthermore, research by Syamsir et al. (2024) found that a collaborative work culture in junior high schools (SMP) enhanced staff interaction, fosters innovation, and promotes alignment toward shared goals (Syamsir et al., 2024). This finding is equally applicable to elementary schools, where principals have the opportunity to cultivate an organizational culture that actively encourages teacher and staff participation in decision-making processes. Such a collaborative culture not only reduces work-related stress but also strengthens employees' sense of belonging and motivation, which, in turn, enhances the principal's effectiveness in managing the educational institution.

Transformational leadership is also a critical factor in cultivating an effective organizational culture. Research by Karsim et al. (2023) demonstrated that principal's transformational leadership significantly influences teacher performance, particularly when reinforced by a positive school culture (Karsim et al., 2023). Principals who adopt a transformational leadership style inspire teachers and staff to excel, foster an environment conducive to innovation, and strengthen shared values within the school community. Consequently, the organizational culture established by the principal not only enhances individual performance but also contributes to the overall effectiveness of the school.

Organizational culture also plays a significant role in alleviating principals' work-related stress, as evidenced by research conducted by Burhanuddin and Sunarni (2017). High levels of work stress can adversely affect principals' performance; however, a strong organizational culture combined with effective leadership can mitigate these stressors. For instance, an organizational culture that promotes open communication and recognizes

achievements fosters a more supportive and conducive work environment. This is consistent with findings that principals operating within positive organizational cultures tend to perform better, as they feel valued, supported, and appreciated.

Overall, an effective organizational culture serves as a fundamental foundation for enhancing the performance of elementary school principals. As Moh Tohet (2023) emphasized, principals can foster a strong organizational culture by engaging the entire school community including students in active participation across various school activities (Moh Tohet & Suriyanto, 2023). By reinforcing organizational culture through transformational leadership, collaboration, and inclusive participation, principals not only elevate their own leadership effectiveness but also cultivate a higher-quality and sustainable educational environment. Consequently, prioritizing the development of organizational culture is essential in elementary school management to achieve optimal educational outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant role of organizational culture in improving the effectiveness of elementary school principals. The findings reveal that organizational culture strongly influences principal performance, where core values such as collaboration, innovation, discipline, and inclusiveness create an environment conducive to effective leadership. Principals act as cultural architects by adopting transformational and participatory leadership styles, demonstrated through practices like mentoring new teachers, conducting inclusive evaluation meetings, and allocating resources for professional development. A strong organizational culture also enables schools to overcome barriers such as resistance to change and administrative burdens while simultaneously fostering motivation, commitment, and social cohesion among the school community. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need to contextualize organizational culture according to diverse school characteristics, particularly the differences between urban and rural settings. These insights align with contingency theory, which underscores the importance of matching leadership style and organizational culture with situational demands to achieve educational goals. In conclusion, strengthening organizational culture through shared values and adaptive leadership emerges as a vital strategy for enhancing the overall effectiveness of elementary school principals.

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