



Situational Leadership of School Principals: Strategies for Strengthening the Quality of Learning in Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to analyze the application of situational leadership of elementary school principals in the archipelago to strengthen teacher professionalism and improve the quality of learning. This study focuses on the three main dimensions of situational leadership, namely diagnostic, adaptive, and professional strengthening, as reflective leadership models relevant to the context of education with limited resources. **Method:** This study used a descriptive qualitative approach involving three elementary schools in Simeulue Regency, Aceh Province, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies, and then analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model, which included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The validity of the data was strengthened through the triangulation of sources and methods. **Results:** The results of the study show that school principals have diagnostic skills in recognizing teacher readiness through reflective, supervision, and open communication. The adaptive dimension is reflected in the principal's flexibility in adjusting the leadership style from directing to delegating based on the teacher's level of competence. The dimension of professional strengthening can be seen through the role of school principals as mentors, facilitators, and motivators who foster collaboration and appreciation of teacher innovation. These three dimensions form a reflective leadership cycle that encourages the creation of a collaborative learning environment responsive to the context of island schools. **Novelty:** This model highlights that leadership effectiveness relies not only on the appropriateness of leadership style, but also on teachers' contextual sensitivity, empathy, and sustained professional growth, forming a holistic and human-centered approach to educational leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Basic education is the most crucial phase in shaping the character, competence, and adaptive power of human resources in a learning society (Dwiningrum, 2021). The quality of basic education is the main indicator of the success of national educational development (Fomba et al., 2023). However, various surveys have shown that the quality of basic education in Indonesia still faces serious challenges. The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that Indonesian students' literacy (427) and numeracy (420) scores are below the OECD average of 487 and 489, respectively (Damanik & Handayani, 2023); (PISA, 2022). This condition shows that there is a gap in the quality of learning, which is not only caused by facilities and infrastructure but also by school leadership factors.

As educational leaders, school principals play a strategic role in driving an effective, collaborative, and quality-oriented learning ecosystem. According to Mincu (2022), educational leadership is not just a structural position but a process of influencing, motivating, and directing organizational members to achieve common goals. In the context of basic education in the archipelago, the success of school principals in carrying out leadership functions is highly dependent on their ability to adapt their leadership

style to subordinate conditions and environmental contexts. Hersey and Blanchard (2019) emphasized that leadership effectiveness is determined by the degree of conformity between the leader's behavior and the readiness level of followers (Houston III et al., 2025). This leadership model is known as the Situational Leadership Model, which outlines four main styles: telling, selling, participating, and delegating.

In a heterogeneous primary school environment, the principal must be an adaptive leader who is sensitive to social, cultural, and geographical contexts. Blanchard (2023) and Gupta (2025) showed that leadership flexibility contributes to increased motivation, job satisfaction, and teacher performance (Han et al., 2022). This is in line with the concept of adaptive leadership by Heifetz and Linsky (2017), who emphasized the importance of the contextual intelligence of leaders in managing dynamic changes in educational organizations. In remote areas such as Simeulue Regency, limited infrastructure and access to training are obstacles. School principals are required to have high diagnostic and adaptive skills to ensure that their leadership strategies remain relevant to the needs of teachers.

Several previous studies have shown that situational leadership has been shown to have an effect on teacher professionalism and performance (Ruslan et al., 2020); (Labib & Asy'ari, 2025); (Mulyadi et al., 2023). However, most of these studies were conducted in urban areas or schools with sufficient resources. Studies that specifically highlight the application of situational leadership in the archipelago are still very limited, even though the geographical and social contexts have unique characteristics that require the adaptation of leadership strategies. In contrast, research on context-responsive leadership (Dang et al., 2025) and transformational leadership in rural schools (Parai & Alias, 2025) confirms that the ability of leaders to read local contexts is the key to improving the quality of education.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this research gap by examining the situational leadership practices of elementary school principals in strengthening the quality of learning within the archipelagic context. The research focuses on three primary dimensions of situational leadership: (1) the diagnostic dimension, which emphasizes the ability of principals to recognize and assess teachers' professional readiness; (2) the adaptive dimension, which highlights the flexibility of leadership styles according to the competence and contextual needs of teachers; and (3) the professional strengthening dimension, which reflects the principals' capacity to foster mentoring, collaboration, and continuous professional development. Through the examination of these three dimensions, this study aims to enrich the theoretical discourse on situational leadership and provide practical insights for leadership development in resource-limited educational settings.

Conceptually, this research is not solely concerned with leadership effectiveness but also with the formation of a reflective, collaborative, and sustainable learning ecosystem in elementary schools. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this study explores how situational leadership functions as a strategic framework for improving instructional quality in geographically dispersed schools—specifically SDN 2, SDN 4, and SDN 8 Salang, Simeulue Regency, Indonesia.

Accordingly, the specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To analyze the diagnostic dimension of situational leadership in identifying teachers' levels of professional readiness in elementary schools located in the archipelago.

2. To investigate the adaptive dimension of situational leadership in adjusting principals' leadership styles according to teachers' readiness and contextual challenges.
3. To examine the professional strengthening dimension, focusing on how principals enhance teacher competence through mentoring, collaboration, and motivational practices.

Ultimately, this study aims to formulate a context-responsive situational leadership model that accurately represents the realities of educational leadership in the archipelagic context. The findings are expected to make both theoretical and practical contributions – by expanding the body of knowledge on situational leadership theory and by offering an applicable framework for improving leadership practices and learning quality in resource-constrained schools across Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Approach and Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, which aims to describe in depth the situational leadership practices of school principals in strengthening the quality of learning in elementary schools. This approach is appropriate because it allows researchers to understand the meaning, experiences, and social interactions in a naturalistic manner without manipulating the research variables. As explained by Su (2024), descriptive qualitative research focuses on understanding phenomena in real contexts, not on statistical generalizations, so as to be able to describe the dynamics of situational leadership that are adaptive, diagnostic, and reflective. This approach is also in line with the view of Negt and Haunschild (2025) that qualitative research is relevant to examine the complex, contextual, and behavior-oriented phenomenon of human behavior in the educational environment.

A descriptive design was chosen to explore in detail how the principal adjusted his leadership style to the teacher's level of readiness. The researcher acted as the primary instrument that collected and interpreted field data through direct interaction with informants. Thus, the researcher acts as an observer and an interpreter of the meaning of the actions of school principals in the social and cultural context of elementary schools in the archipelago. The selection of this design is intended so that the results of the research can provide a holistic understanding of the situational leadership patterns applied by school principals in improving the quality of learning.

B. Location and Research Subject

This research was carried out in three State Elementary Schools (SDN) located in Salang District, Simeulue Regency, namely SDN 2 Salang, SDN 4 Salang, and SDN 8 Salang. The research location was chosen purposively by considering the diversity of school characteristics and leadership context. SDN 2 Salang represents a school with a collaborative culture and high academic performance, SDN 4 Salang shows a participatory leadership style in a heterogeneous social environment, while SDN 8 Salang reflects the condition of the school with limited human resources and learning facilities. The variation in the characteristics of these three schools provides rich contextual insights into the situational leadership practices of school principals in the Archipelago.

The research subjects consisted of three principals and six teachers as the main informants, who were selected based on certain criteria. The criteria included a minimum

of three years of service at the school in question, active involvement in learning and professional development activities, and willingness to participate voluntarily in research. This study places the principal as a key informant because he has a strategic responsibility in the management of human resources and the quality of learning, while the teacher plays the role of a supporting informant who provides an empirical view of the implementation of the principal's leadership style in the daily context in the school.

To provide theoretical clarity and methodological coherence, the interview guide was developed based explicitly on Hersey and Blanchard's (2019) Situational Leadership Theory, which categorizes leadership behavior into four styles: telling, selling, participating, and delegating. These theoretical foundations were articulated prior to constructing diagnostic and adaptive interview questions, ensuring that the collected data were systematically aligned with the model's framework.

Accordingly, the diagnostic component of the guide explored how principals identify teachers' readiness and competence levels (e.g., "How do you assess a teacher's readiness before determining the type of support to provide?"). The adaptive component examined how principals adjust leadership behavior based on those diagnostic insights (e.g., "Can you describe a situation where your leadership style changed according to a teacher's development stage?"). This theoretically grounded structure enhances the transparency, coherence, and analytical depth of the data collection process.

Table 1. Information Coding List

Position	Code
Principal of State Elementary School 2 Salang	K1
Principal of State Elementary School 4 Salang	K2
Principal of State Elementary School 8 Salang	K3
Teacher 1 State Elementary School 2 Salang	G1
Teacher 2 State Elementary School 2 Salang	G2
Teacher 1 State Elementary School 4 Salang	G3
Teacher 2 State Elementary School 4 Salang	G4
Teacher 1 State Elementary School 8 Salang	G5
Teacher 2 State Elementary School 8 Salang	G6

C. Data Collection Techniques

The research data were obtained through three main techniques: participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation studies. These three techniques are used triangulatively so that the research results have high validity and depth of meaning (Belina 2023).

Participatory observation is conducted to directly observe the activities of principals and teachers in a real context. Researchers are involved in school activities such as academic supervision, work meetings and professional coaching. Through this observation, the researcher identified the leadership pattern of school principals in diagnosing teacher readiness, adjusting leadership styles to certain situations, and providing professional reinforcement to teachers. Field records were systematically compiled to record behaviors, interactions, and social contexts relevant to the diagnostic, adaptive, and professional reinforcement dimensions.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the informants' views and experiences related to the principals' situational leadership practices. The interviews were conducted using guidelines developed based on the four main styles of situational leadership according to Islam et al. (2021), namely telling, selling, participating, and

delegating. Questions were arranged openly so that the participants could reflect on their experiences.

To enhance methodological transparency, the interview guide was structured around two core dimensions: (1) the diagnostic dimension, which explored how principals identified teachers' readiness and competence levels for example, "How do you assess a teacher's readiness before deciding on a coaching approach?" or "What indicators do you observe when determining whether a teacher is ready for autonomy?"; and (2) the adaptive dimension, which examined how leadership styles were adjusted according to teachers' conditions for instance, "Can you describe a situation when you changed your leadership approach based on a teacher's development?" or "What kind of support do you provide to new versus experienced teachers?".

Each interview session lasted 40–60 minutes, was recorded with the informant's permission, and then transcribed verbatim. The results of the interviews were verified by the informants through member checking to ensure the suitability of the meaning and avoid misinterpretation.

In addition, a documentation study was conducted by examining various institutional documents such as School Work Plans (RKS), academic supervision reports, teacher performance assessments, meeting minutes, and learning activity reports. These documents serve to strengthen field findings and provide administrative evidence of the application of situational leadership of school principals in the context of improving the quality of learning.

D. Data Validity

To ensure the validity of the data, this study refers to the four validity criteria put forward by Enworo (2023): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The credibility of the data was maintained through triangulation of methods (observation, interviews, and documentation) and triangulation of sources (principals and teachers). In addition, member checking was conducted after each stage of the interview to validate the results of the researcher's interpretation. Transferability is achieved through the presentation of a thick description of the social, cultural, and geographical characteristics of schools in the archipelago so that readers can assess the relevance of the findings to similar contexts. Dependability was maintained by providing audit trails in the form of observation records, interview transcripts, and research documents that were stored systematically. Meanwhile, confirmability was ensured through the researcher's self-reflection (reflexive journal) to avoid subjective bias during the process of data analysis and interpretation.

E. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out simultaneously with the data collection process using an interactive model (Huberman, 2019) which included three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. At the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and encoded data from interviews, observations, and documentation. The data obtained were grouped into three main themes according to the focus of the research: diagnostic, adaptive, and professional strengthening dimensions. The coding process was performed in stages through open, axial, and selective coding to identify relevant themes and subthemes.

The data presentation stage was carried out by compiling the findings in the form of a thematic matrix and a descriptive narrative that describes the relationship between

variables in the context of the school principal's leadership. This process was complemented by direct citations from informants (K1–G6) to reinforce the interpretation of the data. Furthermore, conclusions are drawn by examining the patterns and trends that emerge from the field data. The resulting conclusions are then re-verified through triangulation of sources and techniques to ensure that the findings obtained have a high level of reliability and validity.

F. Research Ethics

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of social and educational research. Before the research activities were conducted, the researcher submitted an application for an official permit to the Simeulue Regency Education Office and the principal at the research site. All informants were given an explanation of the objectives, benefits, and procedures of the research, and then asked to express their willingness to participate through verbal consent. The identity of the informants is kept confidential using codes (K1–K3 for school principals and G1–G6 for teachers). All data obtained were used solely for academic purposes and were not manipulated in any form. The researcher also applied the principle of scientific integrity by maintaining objectivity in data collection and analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study produced three main categories of findings that represent the application of situational leadership of school principals in the context of improving the quality of learning in elementary schools in the Indonesian archipelago. The three categories are: (1) the diagnostic ability of the principal in identifying the level of teacher readiness, (2) the adaptive ability to adapt the leadership style to the conditions and characteristics of the teacher, and (3) the ability of the principal to carry out professional strengthening through teacher coaching and collaboration. The results are presented thematically in accordance with the focus of the analysis developed in the theoretical framework of the research.

A. Diagnostic Dimension: The Ability to Recognize Teacher Readiness

The diagnostic dimension describes the principal's ability to identify the teacher's level of readiness, characteristics, and professional competence as the basis for determining relevant leadership strategies. Based on the triangulation of observation, interview, and documentation data, it was found that all the principals in SDN 2, SDN 4, and SDN 8 Salang showed a structured diagnosis process in carrying out teacher coaching.

The diagnosis process is carried out through three main mechanisms, namely: (1) direct observation of the implementation of classroom learning and teacher-student interaction, (2) reflection on the results of academic supervision carried out periodically, and (3) two-way communication between principals and teachers to discuss professional development needs. These three mechanisms demonstrate the integration of empirical data and practical reflection in the leadership decision-making process.

The principal plays the role of an evaluator and facilitator in understanding teacher readiness. The diagnosis process is not only carried out to assess teacher performance but also to understand the factors that affect motivation, workload, and learning obstacles.

The interview results showed that the principal conducted an individual analysis of the teacher before determining the form of coaching provided. Thus, every leadership decision has an objective and a data-driven diagnosis basis.

Table 2. Diagnostic Dimension Interview

Report	Interview Results
K1	I always observe the way teachers teach and interact with students to assess who needs more mentoring and who is already independent.
G1	The principal gave feedback after the class observation so that we understood our weaknesses and potential.
G2	The principal adjusts his approach based on the results of evaluation and joint discussion.
K2	Before determining a leadership style, I review the results of supervision and have a dialogue with the teacher about their readiness.
G3	The principal asked us about our difficulties before giving directions, so we felt cared for.
G4	The principal understands our conditions, including the constraints of facilities and workload, before making a decision.
K3	I use the supervision results notes to determine the coaching steps according to the teacher's needs.
G5	The principal's analysis makes coaching more directed and according to our capabilities.
G6	The principal invited us to assess the results of our own work so that we were aware of professional development.

Source: Field interview data, 2025

The results of the interviews in Table 2 show that the principals of the three primary schools in the archipelago conducted a thorough analysis of teacher readiness before determining a coaching strategy. The principals (K1, K2, and K3) explained that the diagnosis process is carried out through observation, academic supervision, and reflective dialogue with teachers. Meanwhile, teachers (G1-G6) assessed that the principal understood the condition of each teacher and adjusted the coaching approach to individual needs. This communication pattern creates a sense of mutual trust, which is an important foundation for professional development in the islands' elementary schools.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Diagnostic Dimensions

Data Code	Key Interview Quotes	Meaning/ Open Coding	Category/Axial Coding	Theme/ Selective Coding
K1	"I always observe the way teachers teach and interact with students to assess who needs more assistance and who is already independent."	The principal conducts systematic observation of the teacher's practice as the basis for diagnosis.	Mapping teacher competencies through direct observation.	Mapping of teachers' abilities and readiness
K2	"Before determining the leadership style, I review the results of the supervision and dialogue with the teachers about their readiness."	The principal examines the results of supervision and conducts reflective discussions before coaching.	Decision-making is based on the results of objective evaluation.	Supervision data-driven decision-making
G1	"The principal gave us feedback after the class observation so that we understood our weaknesses and potential."	The principal uses the results of observations to encourage teacher reflection.	Post-observation reflective communication.	Reflective and consultative dialogue

Data Code	Key Interview Quotes	Meaning / Open Coding	Category/Axial Coding	Theme / Selective Coding
G3	"The principal asked about our difficulties before giving directions, so we felt cared for."	The principal identifies needs through open communication.	Participatory and empathetic approach.	Reflective and consultative dialogue
G4	"The principal understands our conditions, including the constraints of facilities and workload, before making a decision."	The principal considers contextual factors in the diagnosis.	Analysis of working conditions and resources.	Field-context-based coaching
K3	"I use the supervision results record to determine the coaching steps according to the teacher's needs."	The principal uses documents as an objective basis for decision-making.	Empirical data-driven analysis.	Data-driven decision-making
G5	"The principal's analysis makes coaching more directed and according to our capabilities."	Teachers feel the direct impact of the principal's diagnosis on coaching.	Customization of individual coaching strategies.	Needs-based personal coaching
G6	"The principal invited us to assess the results of our own work so that we were aware of professional development."	The principal fosters a culture of self-reflection of teachers.	Reflective empowerment in learning	Reflective empowerment of teachers

Based on the thematic analysis in Table 3, three main themes were obtained that reflect the diagnostic abilities of school principals in the archipelago: (1) mapping teachers' abilities and readiness, (2) reflective and consultative dialogue, and (3) decision-making based on data and field context.

First, the principal maps teachers' abilities and readiness through systematic observation of learning practices in the classroom and the results of academic supervision. This mapping is used to identify teachers who need intensive assistance and those who are already independent. The observation-based approach shows that school principals play an active role as evaluators who are sensitive to teachers' real conditions.

Second, the principal should develop a reflective and consultative dialogue with teachers to understand their professional development needs in more depth. Two-way communication was conducted through post-observation discussions and joint reflection forums. This process serves as a means of feedback and as a participatory mechanism that builds teachers' trust and professional awareness. Through these interactions, principals can identify actual problems and provide contextual guidance.

Third, the diagnostic ability of school principals is also reflected in data-based coaching decision-making and the field context. Leadership decisions are not made subjectively but based on the results of supervision, observational records, and other empirical information. In addition, the principal considers non-technical factors such as workload, limited facilities, and the school's geographical condition. This approach demonstrates the existence of contextual awareness in leadership in the archipelago.

The results of the analysis also indicate that the diagnostic ability of school principals directly impacts teachers' reflective empowerment. Through teachers' involvement in the process of self-assessment and professional reflection, a collaborative and responsible

learning culture emerges. Teachers are no longer the object of coaching but subjects who are active in the process of developing their own competencies.

Thus, the diagnostic dimension of the situational leadership of school principals in the archipelago can be concluded as an evaluative-reflective process based on observation, supervision, participatory communication, and contextual analysis. These findings show that the effectiveness of situational leadership depends not only on the ability to provide direction but also on the accuracy of the diagnosis of the teacher's condition, which is the basis for determining the next leadership style.

B. Adaptive Dimension: Adjustment of Leadership Style to Teacher Conditions

The adaptive dimension describes the ability of the principal to adjust their leadership style to the teacher's level of readiness and characteristics. Based on the results of triangulation between interviews, observations, and documentation studies, it was found that the principals at SDN 2, SDN 4, and SDN 8 Salang applied a leadership style that was flexible and responsive to teachers' conditions. The adaptation process includes four main forms of situational leadership styles: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating.

Each style is applied dynamically according to the teacher's level of maturity. The principal does not use a single approach but adjusts between control and trust based on the development of teacher competencies. This flexibility creates a reciprocal working relationship, where the principal acts as a director and a trust. Teachers feel a balance between guidance and independence, and thus, their motivation and professional responsibility increase.

Table 4. Adaptive Dimension Interviews

Report	Interview Results
K1	I adapt my leadership style to the teacher's readiness. For new teachers, I use the <i>directing</i> style, while my experienced teachers give delegation space.
G1	When I was new to teaching, the principal gave a lot of guidance. Now, he gives more trust and space to innovate.
G2	The principal is good at reading situations. When we were in trouble, he was present to give directions, but when he was ready, he was quite supportive from behind.
K2	I always assess the teacher's development. If they improve, my style changes from <i>coaching</i> to <i>supporting</i> or <i>delegating</i> .
G3	We are involved in decision-making. The principal did not always give instructions, but often asked for our opinion.
G4	Flexible leadership style makes us feel comfortable. There is no pressure, instead there is a spirit to do better.
K3	I am able to maintain a balance between giving direction and trust. Both are important to maintain the work spirit of teachers.
G5	With an adaptive approach, we don't feel burdened. The principal always adjusts the way he communicates with our conditions.
G6	Our changing leadership style makes us feel valued and continue to learn to be more independent.

Source: Field interview data, 2025

Table 4 shows that flexibility is at the core of the application of principals' situational leadership style in the archipelago. The principal (K1-K3) emphasized that there is consistency in the process of adapting style from directing to delegating as the readiness and independence of teachers increase. The teachers' statement (G1-G6) reinforces these findings. Teachers feel a change in the principal's approach, which has transformed from

instructive to collaborative and supportive. This pattern shows that adaptive leadership is not only vertical but also participatory, where teachers are involved in decision-making and the development of learning strategies in schools.

Table 5. Thematic Analysis of Adaptive Dimensions

Data Code	Key Interview Quotes	Meaning / Open Coding	Category/Axial Coding	Theme / Selective Coding
K1	"I adjust my leadership style to the readiness of teachers... New teachers use <i>directing</i> , while experienced teachers are given delegated space."	Adjustment of leadership style according to the teacher's level of readiness.	The application of a multi-level style based on the teacher's experience and competence.	Transition of leadership style from directive to delegative.
G1	"When I was new to teaching, the principal gave a lot of guidance. Now it gives more trust and room for innovation."	The provision of autonomy increases along with the development of teachers' competencies.	The shift in the role of the principal from supervisor to facilitator.	Strengthening teachers' independence through trust.
G2	"The principal is good at reading situations... present to give directions, but if you are ready, it is enough to support from behind."	The principal assesses the situation before determining the level of intervention.	Flexibility in providing support or control.	Context-based situational flexibility.
K2	"I always assess the development of teachers. If it improves, my style changes from <i>coaching</i> to <i>supporting</i> or <i>delegating</i> ."	Leadership styles change with the professional development of teachers.	Continuous adaptation based on the results of teacher evaluation.	Adaptive leadership based on continuous evaluation.
G3	"We are involved in decision-making... The principal often asks for our opinion."	Teachers are involved in school decision-making.	Collaborative participatory leadership.	Collaborative and participatory leadership
G4	"A flexible leadership style makes us feel comfortable and motivated."	Leadership style fosters a positive work climate.	The impact of adaptation on teacher motivation.	Motivation and comfort of teachers' work.
K3	"I was able to maintain a balance between giving direction and trust."	The principal maintains a balance between control and autonomy.	Integration of directive and supportive styles.	A balance between control and trust.
G5	"With an adaptive approach, we don't feel burdened... The principal adjusts communication to the conditions."	Adaptive leadership pays attention to the emotional context of the teacher.	Adjustment of interpersonal communication.	Empathetic and contextual leadership.
G6	"The leadership style that changes as needed makes us feel valued and continues to learn."	Changes in leadership style have a positive psychological impact.	Appreciation for the dynamics of teacher competence.	Professional empowerment of teachers.

Source: Field interview data, 2025

Based on the results of the thematic analysis presented in Table 5, the adaptive ability of school principals in the archipelago is demonstrated through their ability to balance

control and trust in the teacher development process. School principals dynamically adjust their leadership styles—from directing, coaching, supporting, to delegating—depending on the teacher's level of readiness, experience, and work motivation. This leadership style transition pattern confirms that the principal plays the role of not only a director, but also a facilitator and collaborative partner in teacher professional development.

The principal applies a directing approach to teachers who are still new and need technical direction in planning and implementing learning. This approach is used to ensure that teachers understand the expected performance standards and have clear guidance on carrying out their duties. However, as teachers' abilities improve, principals have shifted to using a coaching approach, where the focus is no longer on instruction but on providing feedback, motivation, and support to solve learning problems. This is reflected in the statements of K1 and K2, who consider that changes in leadership style need to be carried out in line with the improvement of teacher competence.

In addition, school principals tend to apply a supportive approach that emphasizes collaboration and two-way communication. Teachers (G3 and G4) stated that their involvement in school decision-making and freedom to innovate gave them a sense of appreciation and increased their work motivation. This supportive approach demonstrates the ability of principals to create an open work climate in which every teacher feels equally responsible for the school's success. When teachers have reached a high level of professional maturity, the principal applies a delegating approach, which is to give full responsibility and trust to teachers in carrying out learning tasks and managing school activities.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that leadership flexibility is at the core of the adaptive dimensions. Primary school principals in the archipelago do not regularly use one leadership style but adjust their approach based on continuous evaluation of teachers' conditions. The shift in style from directive to delegative reflects a process of leadership transformation oriented towards the professional empowerment of teachers. Teachers feel more valued, motivated, and encouraged to innovate because the principal allows for participation in every decision-making.

In addition to the technical aspects, the findings confirm the importance of contextual sensitivity in adaptive leadership. The principal considers the social background, limited resources, and geographical challenges of the archipelago when determining the form of support to be provided to the students. This kind of adaptive and empathetic leadership can build trust and emotional closeness between the principal and the teacher. In this context, adaptivity is not only a change in managerial style, but also a reflection of humanistic values that place teachers as active subjects in the process of professional development.

Thus, it can be concluded that the adaptive dimension of situational leadership of school principals in the archipelago is reflective, contextual, and transformative. The principal plays the role of an instructional leader who adapts his or her leadership approach to the teacher's professional development, maintains a balance between direction and trust, and creates a collaborative and inspiring work climate. Flexibility in regulating interactions with teachers is the key to the success of adaptive leadership in strengthening the quality of learning in elementary schools in the archipelago.

C. Dimension of Professional Strengthening: Teacher Coaching and Collaboration

The dimension of professional strengthening reflects the role of the principal as a mentor, facilitator, and motivator in supporting teachers' professional development. Based on the results of interviews, observations, and documentation studies, the principals at SDN 2, SDN 4, and SDN 8 Salang have consistently shown commitment to building teacher capacity through internal coaching activities, ongoing training, and strengthening a culture of collaboration. Interactions based on mutual trust, appreciation, and moral support encourage increased motivation, creativity, and professional responsibility in primary school environments in the archipelago.

This professional strengthening process is carried out in a participatory manner through the lesson study mechanism, school Subject Teacher Deliberation (MGMP) activities, learning reflection, and a forum to share good practices. The principal plays a role not only as an administrative decision-maker but also as a teacher-learning facilitator. This approach is in line with the principles of transformational and situational leadership, where leaders seek to develop the potential of organizational members through support, involvement and appreciation.

Table 6. Professional Strengthening Dimension Interview

Report	Interview Results
K1	I try to be a facilitator for teacher professional development through training, joint reflection, and <i>lesson study</i> .
G1	The principal always supported us in the training and gave us space to try new learning methods.
G2	We feel appreciated because the principal not only assesses the results, but also provides support during the learning process.
K2	I encourage teachers to share experiences with each other through informal discussions and school MGMP activities.
G3	The principal's leadership helps us work together between teachers. We are more open and give each other input.
G4	The principal provided motivation and positive feedback that made us more confident in teaching in the classroom.
K3	I appreciate every teacher's innovation and make it an example for other colleagues to cultivate a healthy competitive spirit.
G5	The principal's support in self-development makes us feel motivated to continue learning and improving our performance.
G6	We feel like we are an important part of the school's transformation because the principal believes in our abilities and gives room for participation.

Sumber: Data hasil wawancara lapangan, 2025

Table 6 shows that all principals in the research site carried out leadership functions oriented towards improving teacher competence and independence. School principals (K1, K2, K3) played an active role in facilitating coaching, training, and reflection activities, while teachers (G1-G6) described positive experiences in terms of moral support, innovation space, and performance rewards. This interaction creates a collaborative work culture in which each teacher feels valued and contributes to the school's progress.

Table 7 shows that school principals in the archipelago play an active role in strengthening teacher professionalism through four main strategies: (1) facilitating and mentoring teacher professionals, (2) strengthening collaboration and learning community, (3) motivation and appreciation of teacher performance, and (4) empowerment and active participation of teachers in school development.

Table 7. Thematic Analysis of the Dimension of Professional Reinforcement

Data Code	Key Interview Quotes	Meaning/ Open Coding	Category/Axial Coding	Theme/ Selective Coding
K1	"I try to be a facilitator for teachers' professional development through training, joint reflection, and <i>lesson study</i> ."	The principal plays the role of a facilitator of professional development.	Facilitate continuous teacher learning.	Facilitation and professional assistance of teachers
G1	"The principal supports us in the training and gives us room for innovation."	The principal's support for training activities and learning experiments.	Support for innovation and competency development.	Principal's support for learning innovation
G2	"We feel appreciated that the principal provided support during the process, not just assessing the results."	The principal appreciated the learning process.	Leadership based on empathy and appreciation.	Appreciation and support for the learning process.
K2	"I encourage teachers to share experiences with each other through informal discussions and school MGMP."	The principal initiated collaboration between teachers.	Strengthening the teacher learning community (CLG).	Professional collaboration between teachers.
G3	"The principal's leadership helps us work together between teachers."	The principal creates a culture of cooperation and mutual learning.	Synergy of teaching teams and collegial work.	Collegial and reflective work culture
G4	"The principal provides motivation and positive feedback."	The principal is a source of professional motivation for teachers.	Reward-based motivational leadership.	Motivation and psychological strengthening of teachers
K3	"I appreciate every teacher's innovation and make it an example for other colleagues."	The principal gave recognition to the performance of innovative teachers.	Awards based on achievement and exemplary.	Performance appreciation and role model building.
G5	"The principal's support keeps us motivated to keep learning."	The support of the principal increases the intrinsic motivation of teachers.	Strengthening commitment to self-development.	Learning motivation and professional commitment
G6	"We feel like we're an important part of the school change."	The principal builds a sense of ownership and participation of teachers.	Participatory empowerment in school change.	Empowerment and active participation of teachers

Source: Field interview data, 2025

First, the principal functions as a facilitator and professional companion to teachers. They provide support in the form of internal training, joint reflection, and lesson study activities that are oriented towards improving the quality of learning. This role shows that the principal not only functions as an administrative manager but also as an instructional leader who accompanies the process of developing teacher competencies sustainably.

Second, the dimension of professional strengthening is reflected in strengthening collaboration and learning communities. The principal encourages teachers to share experiences, discuss informally, and participate in MGMP activities at the school level. This process strengthens collegial relationships and creates a reflective culture in which teachers provide each other with input on teaching practices. This collaborative activity is an effective social learning vehicle for increasing the capacity of teachers in areas with limited external training resources.

Third, the principal fosters motivation and appreciation of teacher performance by providing positive feedback, appreciation for learning innovations, and public recognition of achievements. This practice increases teachers' confidence and enthusiasm in making learning innovations. Support from an empathetic principal also fosters a healthy and productive work climate.

Fourth, the results of the analysis show that there is empowerment and active participation of teachers in the school's development. Teachers are no longer positioned as policy implementers alone but as an integral part of the school change process. The principal gives teachers room to participate in program planning, decision-making, and curriculum innovation. This participatory pattern increases the sense of belonging and collective responsibility for the school's progress.

Overall, the dimension of professional strengthening shows that the leadership of school principals in the archipelago is oriented towards human capital development through a collaborative and appreciative approach. These results support the view of Mulyadi et al. (2023) that situational leadership based on support and appreciation positively affects improving teacher motivation and performance. These findings are also in line with Khaleel et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of the role of school principals as facilitators in creating an inclusive learning environment that respects diversity.

Thus, it can be concluded that the situational leadership of school principals that integrates diagnostic, adaptive, and professional strengthening dimensions is an effective leadership model for improving the quality of learning in elementary schools in the archipelago. Principals who can act as mentors, facilitators, and motivators not only improve teacher competence but also build a collaborative, reflective, and sustainable school culture.

Discussion

The results of this study show that the situational leadership of school principals in the archipelago plays a significant role in strengthening the quality of learning through three main dimensions: diagnostic skills, adaptive abilities, and teacher professional strengthening. These three dimensions form a reflective and interlocking leadership cycle, where the principal acts as a director, facilitator, and motivator in creating a collaborative learning environment oriented towards teacher professional development. This pattern shows that the effectiveness of school leadership is not only determined by managerial ability, but also by the sensitivity of the principal in reading the social context, teacher characteristics, and learning needs in educational units that have limited resources, such as the archipelago (Ruqebatu, 2008).

In the diagnostic dimension, the principal demonstrated the ability to make an initial identification of teacher readiness and competence before determining the right coaching approach. This diagnostic process is not only carried out through formal

supervision but also through direct observation, reflective discussion, and open interpersonal communication. This approach shows a shift in the role of the principal from an administrative controller to a facilitator of professional learning and development. These results are in line with the view (Wang et al., 2024) that the effectiveness of situational leadership is determined by the accuracy of the leader in diagnosing the level of maturity and readiness of the followers. Similarly, Edwards et al. (2025) affirmed that data-driven leadership diagnosis and reflective observation can improve the accuracy of teacher coaching strategies. In the context of island schools, this ability is crucial because school principals must consider geographical factors, limited facilities, and the heterogeneity of teachers' backgrounds when setting coaching policies.

Furthermore, the adaptive dimension shows the ability of the principal to adapt their leadership style to the conditions and characteristics of the teacher. School principals do not apply a rigid leadership pattern but rather are flexible by adjusting the directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating styles based on the teacher's level of readiness. This transition pattern shows a dynamic relationship between the principal and the teacher, where direction and trust are given proportionately to each other. New teachers receive direct guidance and strict supervision, whereas experienced teachers are given space to innovate and make decisions independently. The approach taken reinforces the findings of Yalçinkaya et al. (2021), who mentioned that the flexibility of the principal's leadership style has a direct influence on improving teacher performance and motivation. In this study, flexibility also creates a psychological balance between control and autonomy, which increases teachers' confidence, responsibility, and collaborative spirit in managing learning.

The third dimension, professional strengthening, emphasizes the role of school principals as mentors and facilitators in building teacher capacity. School principals not only provide instruction but also create a sustainable professional learning ecosystem through lesson study activities, internal training, and learning reflection forums. Teachers are given space to innovate, share good practices, and learn together through school MGMP activities. This approach supports the concept of instructional leadership proposed by Hallinger et al. (2025), that learning-focused principals can significantly influence teacher performance through accompanying academic supervision. In addition, appreciating teachers' innovative performance fosters a culture of mutual respect and strengthens intrinsic motivation. These findings are in line with Selvia et al. (2024), who affirmed that leadership that values individual success and encourages collaboration can build an inclusive and productive work environment in elementary schools.

The integration of these three dimensions forms a typical situational leadership model in the context of the archipelago, which can be referred to as context-responsive leadership. The principal not only applies the general principles of situational leadership as described by Del Pino-Marchito et al. (2025), but also adapts it to the geographical, social, and cultural conditions of the school. The leadership process runs cyclically, starting from the diagnosis of teacher readiness, followed by the adjustment of leadership style, and then ending with professional strengthening that fosters teacher independence and reflection. This cycle continues to iterate, creating a sustainable and quality-oriented teacher development system. In the context of this research, situational leadership does not only mean the technical ability to manage subordinates but also the empathic and reflective ability to understand the potential of human resources in limited situations.

Theoretically, the results of this study reinforce Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory, which emphasizes the relationship between leadership style and subordinate readiness levels. However, this study also expands the scope of the theory by demonstrating the importance of contextual and cultural dimensions in its implementation. In the archipelago, leadership success is strongly influenced by leaders' sensitivity to social contexts, infrastructure limitations, and local work culture. Practically, this research has implications for the development of a principal training program that not only emphasizes administrative aspects but also strengthens diagnostic, adaptive, and facilitative competencies. Context-based training, reflective observation, and collaboration among schools are important strategies for strengthening the role of school principals as learning leaders.

Thus, this discussion shows that the situational leadership of school principals in the archipelago is a form of human-oriented reflective leadership. Principals not only manage organizational structures but also cultivate individual capacity through empathy, trust, and collaboration. This approach is relevant to educational challenges in remote areas, where the success of schools depends heavily on the ability of leaders to foster teachers' motivation and commitment to learning. Therefore, contextual and empowerment-oriented situational leadership can be an effective model for improving the quality of basic education in Indonesia, especially in resource-constrained regions.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study confirms that the situational leadership of school principals in the archipelago plays an important role in improving the quality of learning through three main dimensions: diagnostic skills, adaptive skills, and professional strengthening. These three dimensions form a reflective leadership model in which the principal functions as a director, facilitator, and motivator who actively builds teacher professionalism and a collaborative learning culture in the school. **Implications:** Theoretically, this study enriches the concept of situational leadership by adding a context-responsive leadership dimension that emphasizes the importance of sensitivity to local conditions and limited resources. Practically, these findings contribute to the development of principal training that focuses on strengthening diagnostic, adaptive, and facilitative competencies, so that principals can become instructional leaders who empower teachers and encourage innovation and professional reflection in schools. **Limitation:** This study has limitations due to its narrow scope and the limited number of participants in three primary schools in one sub-district of the archipelago. The research design is qualitative and descriptive; therefore, the results cannot be generalized widely, but only provide an in-depth understanding of situational leadership practices in certain contexts. **Future Research:** Further research is suggested to expand the object of study to different educational levels and more diverse areas with a mixed-method or longitudinal approach to quantitatively test the relationship between situational leadership style, motivation, and teacher performance. A comparative study between mainland and island schools is also needed to assess the influence of geographical factors on leadership effectiveness, as well as to integrate situational leadership models with transformational and spiritual leadership models to strengthen ethical and humanistic values in educational leadership practices in Indonesia.

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