

The Role of the Principal in Improving Students' Learning Motivation at Mayangan Islamic Junior High School, Gumukmas District, Jember Regency

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.61796/acjoure.v4i2.514>



Sections Info

Article history:

Submitted: May 07, 2026
Final Revised: June 26, 2026
Accepted: July 18, 2026
Published: August 07, 2026

Keywords:

Principal's Strategy
Learning Motivation
Instructional Strategy
Case Study
Islamic School

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study seeks to explore and explain the strategies employed by the school principal to improve students' learning motivation at SMP Islam Mayangan, located in Gumukmas District, Jember Regency. The study is based on the premise that school leadership plays a significant role in establishing an educational environment that encourages student participation, sustains learning engagement, and strengthens enthusiasm throughout the educational process. **Method:** A qualitative approach with a case study design was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of leadership practices implemented within an Islamic-based educational setting. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, limited participant observation, and document analysis. Informants were selected purposively and consisted of the principal as the key informant, supported by teachers and students who were directly involved in learning activities and school programs. Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, involving data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. **Results:** The results reveal four interconnected strategies applied by the principal to strengthen students' learning motivation: reinforcing academic and religious school culture, enhancing teachers' roles as facilitators of motivation, implementing appreciation and positive reinforcement practices, and fostering closer communication between the principal and students. **Novelty:** This study contributes to the advancement of instructional leadership studies and provides insights for developing more context-sensitive educational policies and practices.

INTRODUCTION

Learning motivation plays an important role in determining the success of educational implementation because it is related to the level of student engagement, perseverance in following the learning process, the ability to face academic challenges, and the achievement of learning outcomes [1]. In the development of 21st-century education, learning motivation is no longer seen as an issue that entirely stems from individual character, but rather as a result of the interaction of various elements that shape the educational environment [2]. Factors such as the school ecosystem, educational leadership patterns, learning culture, the quality of teacher-student relationships, and school organizational support are elements that also influence the formation of learning motivation [3]. Various studies show that school principals hold a strategic position in creating learning conditions that can encourage student engagement and improve the quality of the learning process [4]. The leadership model that places learning as the main orientation (instructional leadership) has been proven to be related to the improvement of learning experiences and student academic engagement [5].

In the context of education in Indonesia, the issue of increasing learning motivation remains a topic of ongoing attention amidst curriculum changes, transformation of the learning system, and the rising demands for student competencies [6]. Several studies show that low learning motivation is often marked by decreased student participation in learning, low enthusiasm for participating in learning activities, a tendency to learn that is solely oriented toward evaluation, and a lack of strong intrinsic drive to achieve success [7], [8], [9], [10]. The condition indicates that improving learning motivation cannot be achieved solely thru pedagogical interventions in the classroom, but requires school leadership capable of building an academic culture, mobilizing the role of teachers, and creating an educational environment that supports the learning process. Research on the relationship between school principal leadership and learning motivation also shows a positive correlation between the quality of leadership, school governance, and the increase in student motivation [11].

Conceptually, the principal not only performs administrative functions in educational management but also plays a role as a learning leader responsible for designing the direction of school development, building an academic climate, conducting supervision, strengthening teachers' capacities, and creating more meaningful learning experiences for students [12]. The perspective of transformational leadership and learning leadership explains that the success of a school is influenced by the leader's ability to mobilize educational resources thru exemplary behavior, effective communication, empowerment, and the establishment of a learning culture [13]. Recent studies also show that participatory and learning-oriented leadership practices contribute to strengthening motivation, student engagement, and improving the quality of the educational process thru the optimization of teachers' roles and the adaptive management of the school environment [14].

In the local context, this research was conducted at SMP Islam Mayangan located in Gumukmas District, Jember Regency. The school is a private junior high school under the auspices of the Yayasan BPPPMNU Cabang Kencong and has an educational character based on Islamic values. With a B accreditation status, this school is part of the educational institutions that serve the needs of the community in the Mayangan area and its surroundings. As a school that develops education based on religious values with a distinctive social character, the principal's strategy in building student learning motivation becomes an important aspect to be studied in depth. This is because leadership practices in the school environment are not only influenced by formal policies but also by values, school culture, and the dynamics of social relationships that develop in everyday educational life.

Although studies on school principal leadership have developed in various research, most previous studies still focus on the influence of leadership on teacher performance, organizational culture, learning outcomes, or use a quantitative approach that emphasizes the relationship between variables. Studies that specifically explore how school principals' strategies are understood, implemented, and experienced by school

members in building student learning motivation—particularly in Islamic junior high schools located in rural or semi-urban areas—are still relatively limited. Moreover, research that explores leadership practices contextually thru the direct experiences of principals, teachers, and students in daily school life has also not been extensively conducted. This condition opens up space for qualitative research to produce a deeper understanding of the processes, meanings, and social experiences that shape students' learning motivation.

Based on the aforementioned description, this study aims to analyze and describe the principal's strategies in enhancing student learning motivation at SMP Islam Mayangan, Gumukmas District, Jember Regency. The focus of the research is directed toward identifying the forms of strategies implemented, the execution process, the supporting and inhibiting factors, as well as the meanings constructed by the school community regarding the leadership practices. From a theoretical perspective, this research is expected to enrich the study of educational leadership, particularly from the perspective of learning leadership and student motivation in the context of Islamic schools. From a practical perspective, the research results are expected to serve as a basis for reflection and recommendations for school principals, teachers, and education policymakers in designing more contextual strategies to strengthen student motivation and improve the quality of the learning process.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research applies a qualitative approach with a case study design (qualitative case study) [15]. This approach was chosen because the research aims to gain a deep understanding of the principal's strategies in enhancing student learning motivation based on the realities occurring in the school environment, rather than measuring the relationships between variables or producing statistical generalizations. Thru a case study design, the research can comprehensively examine educational leadership practices by considering the interconnections between school policies, the behavior of educational actors, organizational culture, and the experiences of the involved parties. The selection of this design is also considered appropriate because the research is oriented toward uncovering the processes, meanings, and dynamics of the implementation of the principal's strategies within a specific social and institutional context.

The research was conducted at SMP Islam Mayangan, Gumukmas District, Jember Regency, during the period of January–March 2026 [16]. The location was purposively determined by considering the school's character, which is based on Islamic values and has leadership practices directly related to the formation of students' learning culture. The research informants include the principal as the main informant, subject teachers and homeroom teachers as supporting informants, as well as students selected based on their level of involvement and participation in the learning process. The selection of informants used purposive sampling techniques with the criteria: (1) having direct

experience with the implementation of policies and school leadership; (2) being actively involved in the learning process for at least the past year; and (3) being willing to provide information openly. If during the research process data enrichment is needed to deepen the findings, the selection of informants will continue using the snowball sampling technique based on recommendations from previous informants.

Data collection was carried out using three main techniques, namely semi-structured interviews, limited participatory observation, and documentation study [17]. Semi-structured interviews are used to obtain information regarding the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of informants about the principal's strategies in building students' learning motivation [18]. The interview guidelines are designed flexibly to allow for the development of questions according to the dynamics that arise during the interaction process. Limited participatory observation was conducted by observing learning activities, the interaction patterns of the principal with teachers and students, the implementation of academic programs, and the school environment conditions related to strengthening learning motivation. Meanwhile, documentation was used as a supporting source thru the review of school documents, such as the principal's work program, activity reports, school regulations, supervision agendas, student achievement archives, and other documents relevant to the research focus [18].

To ensure the level of credibility and validity of the data, this study applies several validation procedures commonly used in qualitative research. First, source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the principal, teachers, and students to see the consistency of meanings and experiences that emerged [19]. Second, method triangulation is applied by matching the results between interviews, observations, and documentation [20]. Third, member checking is conducted by presenting the initial interpretation results to the informants to obtain confirmation of the accuracy of the data interpretation by the researcher [21]. In addition, the researchers compiled an audit trail consisting of field notes, interview recordings, reflective memos, and documentation of the analysis process to enhance the transparency and traceability of all stages of the research [22]. This step was taken to support the aspects of dependability and confirmability of the research results.

Data analysis uses the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which occurs simultaneously and iteratively from the early stages of data collection to the conclusion drawing [23]. The analysis process includes data condensation, data presentation, and the drawing and verification of conclusions. At the condensation stage, all data from interviews, observations, and documentation are transcribed, sorted, and classified according to the research focus. The next stage involves presenting the data in the form of a thematic matrix to identify the patterns of the principal's strategies in enhancing students' learning motivation [24], [25]. Next, the interpretation stage is carried out by examining the relationships between themes in depth to produce a conceptual understanding of the leadership practices developing in the school environment [26].

In the implementation of the research, the researchers also apply the principles of qualitative research ethics, which include informed consent, protection of informants' identity confidentiality, participants' right to withdraw from involvement at any time during the research, and the restriction of data use solely for academic purposes [27]. All research data is stored and managed securely without revealing the personal identities of the participants. Thru this methodological design, the research is expected to produce an in-depth description, have a high level of credibility, and be scientifically accountable in explaining the principal's strategies to enhance student learning motivation at SMP Islam Mayangan, Gumukmas District, Jember Regency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The research findings obtained thru semi-structured interviews, limited participatory observations, and document reviews indicate that the principal's strategy in enhancing student learning motivation at SMP Islam Mayangan is built thru leadership practices that go beyond mere administrative functions. The strategy evolved into a leadership process aimed at creating a learning environment that encourages active student involvement in educational activities. Based on the data analysis process, four main themes were identified that describe the implementation of the strategy, namely: (1) strengthening the school's academic and religious culture, (2) developing the role of teachers as motivators of learning, (3) applying appreciation and reinforcement of positive behavior, and (4) building communicative relationships and emotional closeness between the principal and school community [28]. The four themes are interconnected and form a leadership pattern that supports the development of learning motivation, both sourced from within the students themselves and influenced by the external environment.

The first theme shows that the principal implements motivation enhancement strategies thru the strengthening of an academic culture combined with religious values that form the school's identity. Based on the observation results, it was found that there are habitual activities that support the formation of a learning character, such as guidance before learning begins, monitoring student discipline, periodic evaluation of learning outcomes, and instilling values of responsibility and ethics in academic activities. The principal places the learning process as the main orientation of the school, so that educational activities are understood not only as the fulfillment of formal obligations but also as a means of character building and personal development for the students.

One of the teacher informants stated: "The most noticeable thing is that the principal not only reminds us of academic targets but also always emphasizes how students have a passion for learning because they feel cared for and guided [29]."

The statement was reinforced by the opinion of one of the students:

"If there are school activities or briefings from the principal, we feel more motivated because we are often given encouragement and appreciated when there is progress [30]."

The findings indicate that students' learning motivation develops thru social experiences that are consistently built thru interaction and habituation within the school environment.

The second theme relates to the principal's efforts to strengthen the role of teachers as the parties who interact directly with students during the learning process. The interview results show that the principal conducts regular learning supervision, evaluates the implementation of classroom activities, and opens up reflection spaces for teachers to improve their teaching strategies. In addition, teachers are encouraged to apply more active, interactive teaching methods that can enhance student engagement.

One of the teachers stated: "After supervision, we are usually invited to discuss, not just evaluated. From there, we are encouraged so that students become more active and don't get bored quickly [31]."

Observation results show that the principal's involvement in improving the quality of learning impacts the increase in student participation during the learning activities. This condition indicates that learning motivation is not formed solely thru direct interaction with students, but also thru strengthening the professional capacity of teachers as implementers of learning.

The third theme found in this study relates to the implementation of a reward system as a form of positive behavior reinforcement. Based on the results of documentation and interviews, the school has developed various forms of appreciation for students, both thru recognition of academic achievements, opportunities to participate in certain activities, public awards, and support for students who experience a decline in learning motivation.

One of the students stated:

"If there is an improvement in grades or active participation in class, it is usually announced or appreciated. So, I want to be even more enthusiastic [32]".

However, the form of recognition given is not always in the form of material incentives. Most rewards are manifested in the form of social recognition, attention, and psychological support that provide positive experiences for students. These findings indicate that learning motivation develops when students feel valued, noticed, and recognized for their efforts.

The fourth theme emphasizes the importance of building open communication and emotional closeness between the principal and the students. Based on the results of observations and interviews, the principal not only performs the functions of school management but is also actively present in various school activities, engages in informal communication, and shows concern for the needs and conditions of the students.

The principal stated: "Children need to feel that school is a place that supports them, not just a place of rules and evaluations [33]".

The statement describes that interpersonal relationships are one of the important mechanisms in shaping learning motivation. The presence of the principal directly

creates a sense of security, strengthens students' attachment to the school, and encourages higher engagement in educational activities.

Discussion

The research results show that the principal's strategy in enhancing student learning motivation is more dominantly realized thru instructional leadership practices and transformational leadership. These findings reinforce the view that school principals act as change agents who create learning conditions thru the strengthening of school culture, teacher empowerment, and the development of positive relationships with students. In this context, learning motivation is understood as the result of social interactions and educational experiences systematically shaped within the school environment.

The strengthening of academic and religious culture found in the research indicates that the school environment plays an important role in shaping students' learning orientation and behavior. These findings are in line with social motivation theory, which explains that learning behavior is influenced by environmental expectations, experiences of success, and the social support received by individuals [34]. In the context of religious-based schools, the integration of academic and religious values expands the meaning of learning motivation as a process of forming both intellectual and moral responsibility.

The findings regarding the strengthening of the teacher's role also support previous research that explains that the principal's influence on learning outcomes often occurs thru the improvement of teaching quality and teacher capacity. However, this study shows that supervision conducted reflectively and collaboratively is more effective compared to an administrative approach to supervision. Thus, the principal functions as a facilitator of teachers' professional development rather than merely an executor of formal supervision.

Moreover, the implementation of a reward system and emotional approach shows that students' learning motivation is not entirely determined by material factors [35]. Social recognition, personal attention, and supportive relationships are important elements in maintaining student engagement in learning [36]. This finding enriches the study of learning motivation in religious value-based secondary schools because it shows that the affective aspect plays a role equivalent to the academic dimension.

Practically, the research results indicate that improving learning motivation requires an integrated leadership strategy thru strengthening school culture, developing teacher competencies, a constructive appreciation system, and forming positive interpersonal relationships. From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the study of educational leadership by demonstrating that the effectiveness of school principals' strategies is influenced by the characteristics of school culture and the social dynamics that develop within it [37]. Future research is recommended to expand the research locations, compare different types of schools, or use longitudinal designs to understand the development of learning motivation over a longer period.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: The findings show that the principal's efforts to improve students' learning motivation at SMP Islam Mayangan, Gumukmas District, Jember Regency are not only realized through administrative functions and school management, but also through leadership practices oriented toward the learning process and the formation of an educational culture. Based on the field findings, four main strategies are implemented in an integrated manner, namely strengthening an academic culture integrated with religious values, developing teachers' roles as drivers of learning motivation, implementing an appreciation system as a form of positive behavioral reinforcement, and building closer and more supportive communication between the principal and all school members. The integration of these four strategies contributes to creating a more supportive learning environment that encourages increased student participation, engagement, and enthusiasm for learning. **Implication:** The research findings also indicate that students' learning motivation is the result of a process influenced by various interconnected elements and is not formed solely by individual factors. School leadership, classroom learning practices, school organizational culture, and the quality of social relationships are elements that play a role in shaping students' learning experiences. In this context, the principal occupies an important position as an agent of change who is able to direct the educational environment through value reinforcement, coordination of school resources, teacher empowerment, and the creation of more meaningful learning experiences. From a practical aspect, the findings illustrate that strategies to improve learning motivation will be more effective when designed in a structured and sustainable manner through strengthening school culture, improving teacher competence, providing educational appreciation, and building open communication between the principal, teachers, and students. **Limitation:** Although this study has provided an in-depth understanding of the principal's strategies in improving students' learning motivation, the scope of the research is still limited to one school and a particular social context, so the results obtained need to be understood according to the characteristics of the research location. **Future Research:** Future research is therefore recommended to expand the scope of locations, involve various school characteristics, use comparative approaches across regions, or combine qualitative and quantitative approaches using mixed methods to obtain a broader understanding of the dynamics of school leadership and the formation of learning motivation in diverse educational contexts.

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