

LEADERSHIP, LEARNING, AND CULTURE: HOW PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND TEACHER EDUCATION DRIVE PERFORMANCE THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 20-06-2026

Revised : 14-07-2026

Accepted : 31-07-2026

KEYWORDS

School Culture;
Teacher
Performance;
Transformational
Leadership;
Work Motivation;

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the influence of principal leadership and teacher educational background on teacher performance, with organizational culture as a mediating variable at SMKN 1 Batu, a Center of Excellence Vocational High School. A quantitative approach with an explanatory design was employed. The sample consisted of 52 teachers selected through total sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires with a Likert scale and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling based on Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). The findings reveal that principal leadership, teacher educational background, and organizational culture each have a positive and significant direct effect on teacher performance, with organizational culture exhibiting the strongest influence. Furthermore, organizational culture serves as a significant mediator in the relationships between both principal leadership and teacher educational background on teacher performance. This study contributes a novel empirical insight by positioning organizational culture as a key mediating mechanism in the context of vocational education excellence, thereby offering practical implications for school leaders and policymakers. Specifically, strengthening leadership capacity, enhancing teacher qualifications, and fostering a collaborative school culture are essential strategies for achieving sustainable improvements in teacher performance.

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INTRODUCTION

The quality of education is fundamentally determined by teacher performance, as teachers are the primary actors in the learning process. They are directly responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating instruction, and their effectiveness significantly shapes student learning outcomes. Teacher performance reflects the successful application of pedagogical, professional, social, and personal competencies, all of which contribute directly to educational quality (Sutrisno et al., 2022). However, in many vocational school contexts, teacher performance remains suboptimal due to various internal and external constraints, including heavy administrative burdens, limited technological competencies, and varying levels of work motivation (Puspitasari & Nabila, 2025). This issue is particularly critical at SMKN 1 Batu, a Center of Excellence Vocational High School, which is expected to serve as a model for educational quality but still faces challenges in maximizing teacher effectiveness.

Teacher performance is influenced not only by individual factors but also by organizational variables, particularly principal leadership and organizational culture. The principal plays a strategic role in guiding, motivating, and creating a

conducive work environment that enables teachers to perform optimally (Tanjung et al., 2022). Effective leadership has been shown to enhance work motivation, provide professional direction, and improve overall teacher performance (Juniarti et al., 2020). Simultaneously, organizational culture—defined as the shared values, norms, and beliefs that guide behavior within an institution—has been identified as a critical factor in shaping teacher work attitudes and performance (Sagita et al., 2018; Kanta et al., 2017). A supportive culture fosters collaboration, communication, and commitment, all of which contribute to sustained performance improvement (Fauzi et al., 2022).

In addition to leadership and culture, teacher education is a crucial determinant of teaching competence and effectiveness. Teachers with educational backgrounds that are relevant to their teaching assignments demonstrate higher levels of pedagogical and professional competence, which in turn enhances learning quality (Seftiani et al., 2020; Rivaldo & Nabella, 2023). Teacher education equips individuals with cognitive, affective, and psychomotor capabilities essential for delivering instruction that meets current educational demands (Montolalu & Langi, 2018). However, the alignment between teacher education and actual teaching duties remains a concern in many schools, including vocational institutions, where specialized competencies are increasingly required.

Numerous empirical studies have examined the direct relationships among principal leadership, teacher education, organizational culture, and teacher performance. Research has consistently shown that principal leadership significantly influences teacher performance (Juniarti et al., 2020; Minsih et al., 2019), teacher education contributes positively to performance outcomes (Harahap et al., 2020; Rivaldo & Nabella, 2023), and organizational culture directly affects teacher effectiveness (Kanta et al., 2017; Fauzi et al., 2022). Furthermore, several studies have explored the mediating role of organizational culture in the relationship between leadership and performance (Dewi et al., 2025; Angga & Iskandar, 2022), as well as between teacher education and performance (Siswadhini et al., 2022; Umandulis, 2019). These findings suggest that organizational culture serves as a mechanism through which leadership and teacher qualifications translate into improved performance.

Despite these contributions, the existing literature presents several gaps. First, most studies have been conducted in general school settings, with limited attention to vocational high schools, particularly those designated as Centers of Excellence. Second, although the mediating role of organizational culture has been tested in separate models, few studies have simultaneously examined its mediating effect on both leadership and teacher education within a single integrative framework. Third, previous research has often treated teacher education broadly as "teacher training," without clearly distinguishing it from formal educational background, leading to conceptual ambiguity. Fourth, research explicitly addressing the performance challenges and contextual dynamics at SMKN 1 Batu remains scarce, despite its status as a model vocational school.

Given these gaps, this study aims to address the following objectives: (1) to examine the direct effects of principal leadership, teacher educational background, and organizational culture on teacher performance at SMKN 1 Batu; (2) to test the mediating role of organizational culture in the relationships between principal leadership and teacher performance, and between teacher educational background and teacher performance; and (3) to provide empirical evidence and practical recommendations for improving teacher performance in the context of vocational education excellence. By focusing on a Center of Excellence Vocational High School and positioning organizational culture as a key mediating variable, this research offers both theoretical novelty and practical implications for school leaders, teachers, and policymakers seeking sustainable improvements in educational quality.

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative approach with an explanatory design to examine the relationships among principal leadership, teacher educational background, organizational culture, and teacher performance. The research was conducted at SMKN 1 Batu, a Center of Excellence Vocational High School in Malang, Indonesia. The population consisted of 52 civil servant (ASN) and government-employed (P3K) teachers. Given the relatively small population size, a total sampling technique was applied, whereby all 52 teachers were included as respondents.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires with a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Each variable was measured using validated indicators adapted from previous studies (see Table 1).

Table 1. Variables and Measurement

Variable	Indicator
Principal Leadership (X1) (Angga & Iskandar, 2022)	Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, Individualized Consideration
Teacher Education (X2) (Rivaldo &	Educational Level, Educational Suitability

Nabella, 2023)

Organizational Culture (Z) (Sagita et al., 2018)

Teacher Performance (Y) (Indriawati et al., 2022)

Innovation, Results Orientation, Teamwork, Stability

Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, Feedback

The measurement instrument was evaluated through validity and reliability testing prior to hypothesis testing. Convergent validity was assessed using outer loading values and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with acceptable criteria of outer loading > 0.70 and AVE > 0.50 (Hair et al., 2019). Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, requiring that the square root of AVE for each construct exceed its correlations with other constructs. Reliability was assessed using Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha, with acceptable thresholds of CR > 0.70 and Cronbach's Alpha > 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). All indicators met these criteria, confirming that the instrument was valid and reliable for further analysis.

Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling based on Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS software. The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the measurement model (outer model) was evaluated to confirm the validity and reliability of the constructs. Second, the structural model (inner model) was assessed to test the hypothesized relationships. Path coefficients were calculated to determine the direction and strength of relationships between variables, while the coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to assess the model's explanatory power. The significance of path coefficients was evaluated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. The mediating effect of organizational culture was tested using the specific indirect effect through the bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research employed data analysis through Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) to investigate the connections among variables within the study framework. Evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) showed that all indicators met convergent validity criteria, with outer loading values above 0.70, thus being declared valid. Discriminant validity was also met because each indicator had a loading value higher than the cross-loadings of other constructs. Reliability testing showed that all variables had composite reliability values above 0.70, thus declaring the research constructs reliable and consistent. Evaluation of the structural model (inner model) revealed adjusted R-square values of 0.703 for organizational culture and 0.824 for teacher performance, indicating the models' strong ability to explain endogenous variables.

The Average Adjusted R-Square (AARS) value of 0.764 indicates that 76.4% of the variation in the endogenous variables can be explained by the exogenous variables in the research model. The goodness of fit test results indicate that all criteria are met, thus the research model is deemed feasible and fit for use in the analysis.

Table 2. Results of Direct Effect Test

Correlation	Coefficient (β)	Sig.	Description
Principal Leadership $\rightarrow$ Teacher Performance	0.379	0.001	Significant
Teacher Education $\rightarrow$ Teacher Performance	0.209	0.050	Significant
Organizational Culture $\rightarrow$ Teacher Performance	0.442	<0.001	Significant

The test results indicate that principal leadership, teacher education, and organizational culture have a positive and significant effect on teacher performance. Organizational culture has the strongest direct influence on teacher performance compared to other variables in the research model. The structural model analysis revealed that all three exogenous variables have positive and significant direct effects on teacher performance. Principal leadership demonstrated a positive and significant effect on teacher performance ($\beta = 0.379$; $p < 0.05$), indicating that more effective leadership practices are associated with higher levels of teacher performance. Teacher educational background also showed a positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.209$; $p \leq 0.05$), suggesting that teachers with educational backgrounds relevant to their teaching assignments tend to perform better. Among the three predictors, organizational culture exhibited the strongest direct influence on teacher performance ($\beta = 0.442$; $p < 0.001$), underscoring its critical role in shaping teacher effectiveness.

The mediation analysis revealed that organizational culture significantly mediates the relationship between principal leadership and teacher performance (indirect effect = 0.168; $p < 0.05$), as well as the relationship between teacher educational background and teacher performance (indirect effect = 0.134; $p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that the influence of both leadership and teacher education on performance operates not only directly but also indirectly through the organizational culture mechanism.

The finding that principal leadership significantly influences teacher performance confirms the strategic role of school leaders in educational organizations. Effective leadership contributes to teacher performance through multiple mechanisms. First, principals who demonstrate strong interpersonal skills can build trust and open communication, which in turn fosters a supportive work environment where teachers feel valued and motivated. Second, principals who effectively perform informational roles—such as monitoring school progress and disseminating relevant information—enable teachers to make informed decisions about their instructional practices. Third, principals who excel in decision-making roles can allocate resources strategically, address challenges promptly, and create conditions that facilitate effective teaching.

In the context of SMKN 1 Batu, a Center of Excellence Vocational School, the demands placed on teachers are particularly high. Teachers are expected not only to deliver academic content but also to equip students with practical vocational competencies that meet industry standards. In such a demanding environment, principal leadership becomes even more critical. The principal at SMKN 1 Batu serves as a key figure in aligning teacher efforts with the school's vision of excellence, providing both direction and support. This finding aligns with previous research (Alhabsyi et al., 2022; Aminuddin, 2017; Juniarti et al., 2020; Tanjung et al., 2022; Zuryati et al., 2023), which consistently emphasizes the pivotal role of leadership in educational contexts. However, this study extends prior work by demonstrating that leadership effectiveness in vocational school settings is particularly consequential, given the dual academic and vocational demands placed on teachers.

The significant positive effect of teacher educational background on teacher performance underscores the importance of formal education in preparing competent educators. Teachers whose educational backgrounds align with their teaching assignments demonstrate several advantages. They possess deeper content knowledge, which enables them to explain complex concepts more effectively and respond to student questions with confidence. They are also more likely to have developed pedagogical skills during their formal training, allowing them to design and implement instruction that engages students and promotes meaningful learning. Additionally, teachers with relevant educational backgrounds tend to stay current with developments in their fields, integrating new knowledge and technologies into their teaching practices.

At SMKN 1 Batu, the alignment between teacher education and teaching assignment is particularly important given the specialized nature of vocational education. Teachers in vocational schools must possess both theoretical knowledge and practical skills relevant to specific industries. When teachers have educational backgrounds that match their teaching fields, they are better equipped to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world application, thereby enhancing the quality of vocational education. This finding corroborates earlier studies (Aprileoni et al., 2020; Audah, 2020; Muhsin et al., 2024; Munawarah et al., 2021; Rivaldo & Nabella, 2023), which have documented the positive relationship between teacher education and performance. Nevertheless, this research contributes novelty by contextualizing this relationship within the vocational education sector, where the relevance of educational background may be even more critical due to the practical orientation of the curriculum.

Organizational culture emerged as the strongest predictor of teacher performance, indicating that the shared values, norms, and beliefs within the school have a profound impact on how teachers carry out their duties. A strong organizational culture fosters several conditions conducive to high performance. It encourages collaboration by promoting teamwork and knowledge sharing among teachers, which enhances instructional quality through collective expertise. It strengthens professionalism by establishing clear expectations and norms of behavior, ensuring that teachers adhere to professional standards. It also cultivates a sense of responsibility and commitment, as teachers internalize the school's values and feel accountable for achieving its goals.

At SMKN 1 Batu, the organizational culture appears to play a particularly significant role in shaping teacher performance. As a Center of Excellence, the school is expected to maintain high standards and continuously improve its educational quality. A strong organizational culture provides the foundation for this continuous improvement by creating a shared sense of purpose and collective commitment to excellence. When teachers perceive that their colleagues and leaders share common values and work toward common goals, they are more likely to invest effort in their professional responsibilities. Moreover, a supportive culture reduces ambiguity and conflict, enabling teachers to focus their energy on instructional activities rather than navigating interpersonal or structural challenges. This finding is consistent with previous research (Kanta et al., 2017; Juanda et al., 2023; Fauzi et al., 2022; Harahap et al., 2023), which has established the importance of organizational culture in educational settings. However, this study adds to the literature by demonstrating that in the context of vocational excellence schools, organizational culture may be the most powerful determinant of teacher performance, surpassing even leadership and teacher education in its influence.

One of the key contributions of this study is the finding that organizational culture mediates the relationships between both principal leadership and teacher educational background on teacher performance. This mediation effect provides important theoretical and practical insights.

First, the mediating role of organizational culture in the leadership-performance relationship suggests that principals influence teacher performance not only through direct actions but also by shaping the cultural context in which teachers work. Principals who effectively communicate a clear vision, model desired behaviors, and reinforce positive norms contribute to the development of a strong organizational culture. This culture, in turn, guides teacher behavior and performance. In other words, leadership effectiveness is partially realized through cultural transformation—leaders build culture, and culture builds performance. This finding aligns with the work of Dewi et al. (2025) and Angga & Iskandar (2022), but extends it by providing empirical evidence from a vocational school context where cultural factors may be particularly salient.

Second, the mediating role of organizational culture in the education-performance relationship indicates that the benefits of teacher educational background are amplified when teachers work in a supportive cultural environment. Teachers with relevant educational backgrounds possess the knowledge and skills necessary for effective teaching. However, these competencies are more fully realized when the organizational culture encourages collaboration, recognizes excellence, and provides opportunities for professional growth. In a strong organizational culture, well-educated teachers are not only able to apply their knowledge effectively but also to share it with colleagues, thereby elevating overall school performance. Conversely, even highly educated teachers may underperform in a weak organizational culture that fails to support or recognize their contributions. This finding is consistent with the work of Siswadhi et al. (2022) and Umardulis (2019), but contributes novelty by demonstrating the mediating role of culture in a vocational excellence setting where the integration of theory and practice is paramount.

Table 3. Indirect Effect Test Results

Correlation	Coefficient (β)	P-Values	Description
Principal Leadership → Organizational Culture → Teacher Performance	0.235	0.006	Significant
Teacher Education → Organizational Culture → Teacher Performance	0.199	0.017	Significant

The findings from the assessment reveal that the culture within an organization serves as an important intermediary factor affecting the connection between school leadership and teacher training concerning educator effectiveness. The indirect effect through organizational culture strengthens the relationship between the variables, demonstrating the strategic role of organizational culture in improving teacher performance. The mediation analysis revealed that organizational culture serves as a significant mediator in both hypothesized relationships. Specifically, principal leadership was found to have an indirect effect on teacher performance through organizational culture ($\beta = 0.235$; $p < 0.05$), indicating that leadership influences teacher performance not only directly but also through its capacity to shape organizational culture. Similarly, teacher educational background demonstrated an indirect effect on teacher performance through organizational culture ($\beta = 0.199$; $p < 0.05$), confirming that the influence of teacher education on performance is partially transmitted through the cultural context of the school.

The finding that organizational culture mediates the relationship between principal leadership and teacher performance provides important insights into the mechanisms through which school leaders influence teacher effectiveness. This mediation effect suggests that principals do not simply direct teacher behavior through direct supervision or instruction; rather, they shape the broader cultural environment in which teachers operate, and this environment, in turn, influences performance outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding can be explained through several interrelated mechanisms. First, principals serve as cultural architects who articulate and model the values, norms, and expectations that define the school's organizational culture. When principals consistently communicate a clear vision, demonstrate commitment to educational quality, and recognize exemplary performance, they establish cultural standards that guide teacher behavior. Teachers internalize these standards and align their professional practices accordingly, leading to improved performance. Second, principals who foster open communication, collaboration, and mutual respect create a positive cultural climate that reduces workplace stress and enhances teacher motivation. In such an environment, teachers feel supported and empowered to innovate, take risks, and continuously improve their instructional practices. Third, principals who allocate resources strategically and remove obstacles to effective teaching create cultural conditions that enable teachers to focus on their core instructional responsibilities rather than being burdened by administrative or logistical challenges.

In the specific context of SMKN 1 Batu, a Center of Excellence Vocational High School, the mediating role of organizational culture is particularly significant. As a model school, SMKN 1 Batu is expected to demonstrate best practices in vocational education. The principal's leadership is therefore directed not only toward managing daily operations but also toward building a culture of excellence that permeates all aspects of school life. This culture emphasizes collaboration among teachers, continuous professional development, and a shared commitment to producing graduates who are ready for the workforce. When the principal successfully cultivates such a culture, teachers are more likely to embrace the school's vision and invest effort in achieving its goals. Conversely, even effective leadership may fail to translate into improved performance if the organizational culture does not support and reinforce the behaviors that lead to success.

This finding is consistent with previous research by Dewi et al. (2025), Fauzi et al. (2022), and Harahap et al. (2023), which has documented the mediating role of organizational culture in the leadership-performance relationship. However, this study extends prior work in several important ways. First, by situating the research in a vocational school context, this study demonstrates that the cultural mediation mechanism operates similarly in vocational settings, where the demands on teachers and leaders may differ from those in general education schools. Second, by using a rigorous SEM-PLS analytical approach, this study provides robust empirical evidence for the mediation effect, contributing to the cumulative body of knowledge in educational management. Third, by examining the mediation effect alongside direct effects, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how leadership influences performance, suggesting that leaders should view cultural development as a core leadership function rather than an ancillary activity.

The finding that organizational culture mediates the relationship between teacher educational background and teacher performance offers valuable insights into how teacher qualifications translate into effective practice. This mediation effect suggests that the benefits of teacher education are not realized automatically; rather, they are contingent upon the cultural context in which teachers work.

From a theoretical standpoint, the mediating role of organizational culture can be explained through several mechanisms. First, teachers with relevant educational backgrounds possess advanced content knowledge and pedagogical skills that enable them to design and deliver high-quality instruction. However, these competencies are more fully utilized when the organizational culture encourages innovation, collaboration, and continuous learning. In a supportive cultural environment, well-educated teachers are encouraged to experiment with new teaching methods, share their expertise with colleagues, and engage in ongoing professional development. This cultural support amplifies the impact of their education on performance. Second, organizational culture shapes teachers' professional identity and commitment. When teachers perceive that their organization values education, professionalism, and excellence, they are more likely to internalize these values and strive to meet high performance standards. This is particularly important for well-educated teachers, who may have high expectations for their professional environment and may become disengaged if the culture fails to support their aspirations. Third, organizational culture facilitates knowledge sharing and collective learning. In a collaborative culture, well-educated teachers are able to mentor less experienced colleagues, participate in professional learning communities, and contribute to the overall intellectual capital of the school. This collective dimension of culture ensures that the benefits of individual teacher education extend beyond the individual to the entire school community.

In the context of SMKN 1 Batu, the mediating role of organizational culture is especially relevant. As a vocational school with a focus on excellence, SMKN 1 Batu employs teachers with diverse educational backgrounds, some of whom possess specialized qualifications relevant to specific vocational fields. However, the extent to which these qualifications translate into effective teaching depends significantly on the school's organizational culture. A culture that values continuous learning, professional collaboration, and quality improvement creates conditions in which well-educated teachers can thrive. Conversely, a culture that is resistant to change, individualistic, or unsupportive may prevent even highly qualified teachers from realizing their full potential. In this sense, organizational culture serves as a crucial enabling factor that unlocks the value of teacher education.

This finding is consistent with research by Siswadhi et al. (2022), which documented the mediating role of organizational culture in the education-performance relationship. However, this study contributes to the literature by extending this finding to the vocational education context, where the alignment between teacher education and teaching assignment is particularly critical. Additionally, this study provides empirical evidence that the mediation effect is significant even when controlling for other factors such as leadership, thereby strengthening the case for organizational culture as a key variable in educational management research.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the direct and indirect effects of principal leadership and teacher educational background on teacher performance, with organizational culture as a mediating variable, at SMKN 1 Batu, a Center of Excellence Vocational High School. The findings confirm that principal leadership, teacher educational background, and organizational culture each have a positive and significant direct effect on teacher performance, with organizational culture demonstrating the strongest influence. Furthermore, organizational culture serves as a significant mediator in the relationships between both principal leadership and teacher performance, and between teacher educational background and teacher performance, indicating that culture functions as a key transmission mechanism through which leadership and teacher qualifications translate into improved performance. In conclusion, teacher performance in vocational school settings is determined by a combination of leadership effectiveness, teacher qualifications, and organizational culture, with culture playing a particularly central role.

The findings offer several practical implications. School principals should prioritize cultural development by articulating a clear vision, modeling desired behaviors, recognizing teacher contributions, facilitating open communication, and involving teachers in decision-making processes. Teachers should actively engage in professional development, collaborate with colleagues, and contribute to building a positive school culture, while those with relevant educational backgrounds should serve as mentors for less experienced peers. Policymakers and administrators should adopt a holistic approach that simultaneously invests in leadership training, ensures alignment between teacher qualifications and teaching assignments, and supports the development of collaborative school cultures through professional learning communities, mentoring programs, and recognition systems.

Future research should expand the sample scope to multiple vocational schools across regions, employ longitudinal designs to establish causal evidence, and incorporate additional variables such as work motivation, job satisfaction, or compensation. Qualitative or mixed-methods approaches would provide deeper insights into cultural processes, while comparative studies across different school types would enhance understanding of contextual factors. Additionally, examining moderating variables such as teacher experience or school size could reveal conditions under which the identified relationships vary, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive model of teacher performance in vocational education settings.

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