



Building Vocational High School Teacher Performance through the Synergy of Transformational Leadership, Organizational Culture, and Work Motivation in the Era of Vocational Education

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Abstract

This study investigates the direct and indirect effects of principals' transformational leadership, organizational culture, and work motivation on teacher performance in public vocational high schools (SMK) in Tebing Tinggi City. Employing a quantitative cross-sectional design with path analysis, data were collected from 153 teachers selected via proportional random sampling. Results reveal that organizational culture exerts the strongest direct influence on work motivation (77.8%), establishing it as the primary determinant of motivational climates. Work motivation functions as a critical amplifier, mediating the relationships between leadership/culture and teacher performance. Direct effects on performance are moderate: leadership (26.1%), culture (33.3%), and motivation (35.5%). However, indirect pathways through motivation yield substantially higher explanatory power (38.8% and 36.7%), with a simultaneous model accounting for 40.0% of performance variance. All hypothesized relationships are statistically significant, and the structural model demonstrates perfect fit. The findings challenge leadership-centric paradigms by highlighting organizational culture as the foundational driver of teacher motivation in vocational settings. Practically, the study advocates for integrated management strategies that prioritize culture-building, visionary leadership, and motivational interventions to sustain pedagogical excellence and enhance graduate workforce readiness in Industry 4.0.

Introduction

In the increasingly dynamic era of vocational education, teacher performance has emerged as a critical determinant of educational success, particularly in aligning graduate competencies with industry demands. Vocational high school (SMK) teachers are expected to master not only pedagogical and professional competencies but also to integrate project-based learning, emerging technologies, and industry-standard skill requirements into their instructional practices. Herbert et al (2020), Novrizal & Muhammad (2025), and Syarif & Janata (2024) emphasize that curriculum relevance and teachers' adaptability to technological advancements are pivotal in producing work-ready graduates. Without sustained high performance, the fundamental objective of vocational education to develop skilled, competitive, and industry-aligned human resources remains difficult to achieve (Suwarno et al., 2023; Yoganandham, 2025; Celestin, 2022).

Despite these expectations, empirical evidence indicates that teacher performance in many vocational schools continues to face structural and psychological constraints. Preliminary observations and institutional reports frequently highlight persistent challenges, including delayed instructional planning, low engagement in professional learning communities, and limited integration of digital tools in classroom practices. Eka et al. (2024), Lee et al. (2025),

and Weber et al. (2025) argue that teacher performance deficits are inherently multidimensional, shaped not merely by individual competence but also by the institutional climate, administrative support, and collaborative work environments. These realities underscore the necessity of moving beyond isolated technical training toward a more holistic approach that strengthens the underlying organizational ecosystem of vocational schools (David, 2023; Ramsarup et al., 2023).

Within this context, principals' transformational leadership emerges as a strategic catalyst capable of driving meaningful behavioral change and reinforcing teacher commitment. Unlike conventional managerial approaches, transformational leadership emphasizes the co-creation of a shared vision, the provision of intellectual stimulation, and individualized support for teachers' professional development. Candra (2024) and Yakob et al (2025) asserts that transformational principals cultivate an inspiring organizational climate where educators feel recognized, empowered, and intrinsically motivated to surpass baseline performance expectations. Through consistent role modeling, empathetic communication, and strategic delegation, school leaders can effectively reframe vocational education challenges as opportunities for continuous pedagogical and technical innovation (Goo et al., 2025; Kamara & Burhanuddin, 2025; Sari et al., 2026; Mangione et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the efficacy of transformational leadership must be substantiated by a robust organizational culture and sustained work motivation. Organizational culture operates as a shared system of values, norms, and implicit assumptions that shape collective behavior, thereby fostering a climate characterized by collaboration, professional discipline, and a quality-oriented mindset (Geysi et al., 2020; Kurnia et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2026). Concurrently, work motivation functions as the critical psychological mechanism that mobilizes energy, directs effort, and sustains persistence in executing the multifaceted demands of vocational instruction. Alfiyanto et al (2021) and Layek & Koodamara (2024) demonstrate that teacher motivation encompassing both intrinsic drive and extrinsic reinforcement exerts a direct and substantial influence on instructional quality, pedagogical adaptability, and responsiveness to evolving curriculum standards.

Although extensive literature has examined these variables in isolation or through simplistic linear models, empirical research investigating their simultaneous synergy within the specific context of vocational education remains notably scarce. Prevailing studies frequently position leadership as the sole dominant predictor or conceptualize motivation merely as a passive mediating mechanism, thereby underestimating the foundational and amplifying role of organizational culture. Hafizi & Cinantya (2025) and Wigati (2025) contend that an integrated analytical framework, which examines leadership, organizational culture, and motivation as an interconnected ecosystem, offers a more comprehensive and contextually grounded explanation of teacher performance determinants.

This study introduces theoretical novelty by conceptualizing transformational leadership, organizational culture, and work motivation as a synergistic triad that collectively amplifies teacher performance in vocational high schools. Departing from reductionist analytical models, the proposed synergy framework posits that leadership efficacy is maximized only when strategically embedded within a supportive organizational culture, which subsequently serves as a catalyst for activating and sustaining teachers' work motivation. This conceptualization is particularly salient to the vocational education landscape, which demands intensive school-industry collaboration, adaptive pedagogical practices, and a teaching workforce characterized by high professional resilience, technical agility, and sustained commitment.

Grounded in this rationale, the present study aims to empirically examine the synergistic influence of principals' transformational leadership, organizational culture, and work motivation on teacher performance, with a specific focus on public vocational high schools in Tebing Tinggi City. The findings are anticipated to yield dual contributions: theoretically, by refining contextual models of educational human resource management that account for systemic variable interactions; and practically, by providing evidence-based policy recommendations for school administrators and regional education authorities. Ultimately, this research seeks to inform strategic interventions that elevate the quality of vocational instruction, ensuring it remains adaptive, professionally rigorous, and closely aligned with contemporary workforce demands.

Methods

This study employed a quantitative research approach with a path analysis design to examine the influence of transformational leadership and organizational culture on teacher performance, with work motivation as a mediating variable. The research was conducted at public vocational high schools (SMKN) in Tebing Tinggi City, involving a population of 246 teachers, from which a sample of 153 respondents was selected using proportional random sampling. Data were collected through structured questionnaires employing a Likert scale, with instruments developed based on established theoretical frameworks: Bass and Avolio's dimensions for transformational leadership, Robbins' indicators for organizational culture, Herzberg and McClelland's theories for work motivation, and Rivai's criteria for teacher performance. Prior to main data collection, instrument validity was tested using Product Moment correlation, and reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with all variables demonstrating acceptable reliability coefficients above 0.6.

Data analysis was conducted in two stages: descriptive statistics to profile respondent characteristics and variable distributions, followed by inferential statistics to test the proposed hypotheses. Prerequisite analyses including normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov), homogeneity (Levene's test), linearity, and multicollinearity tests were performed to ensure the appropriateness of parametric analysis. The main hypothesis testing utilized Path Analysis via SPSS software to examine both direct and indirect effects among variables, with significance determined at $\alpha = 0.05$. The model fit was evaluated using Goodness-of-Fit criteria to confirm the adequacy of the proposed causal structure. This methodological framework enabled a comprehensive examination of how transformational leadership and organizational culture influence teacher performance directly and indirectly through work motivation within the vocational education context.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Analysis of Research Variables

The descriptive analysis reveals the fundamental characteristics of four key variables examined in this study. The data demonstrates that Transformational Leadership scores range from 44 to 117, with a mean of 80.54 and a standard deviation of 17.438. The distribution shows that most respondents perceive transformational leadership at their institutions within the moderate to good category, indicating room for improvement in leadership practices. Organizational Culture demonstrates scores between 44 and 117, averaging 82.88 with a standard deviation of 16.168. The frequency distribution indicates that organizational culture is perceived positively by the majority of teachers, with 26.14% falling in the good category. This suggests that schools have established relatively strong cultural foundations that support educational activities.

Work Motivation scores range from 44 to 117, with a mean of 82.00 and standard deviation of 16.777. The data reveals that 26.79% of respondents report good levels of work motivation. Teacher Performance scores vary from 44 to 116, averaging 82.70 with a standard deviation of 16.074, indicating that most teachers perform at satisfactory levels.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Transformational Leadership	153	80.54	17.438	44	117
Organizational Culture	153	82.88	16.168	44	117
Work Motivation	153	82.00	16.777	44	117
Teacher Performance	153	82.70	16.074	44	116

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 demonstrate that all four variables exhibit relatively similar mean scores ranging from 80.54 to 82.88, suggesting balanced development across leadership, culture, motivation, and performance dimensions. The standard deviations indicate moderate variability in responses, while the minimum and maximum scores reveal the full spectrum of perceptions among the 153 respondents from vocational high schools.

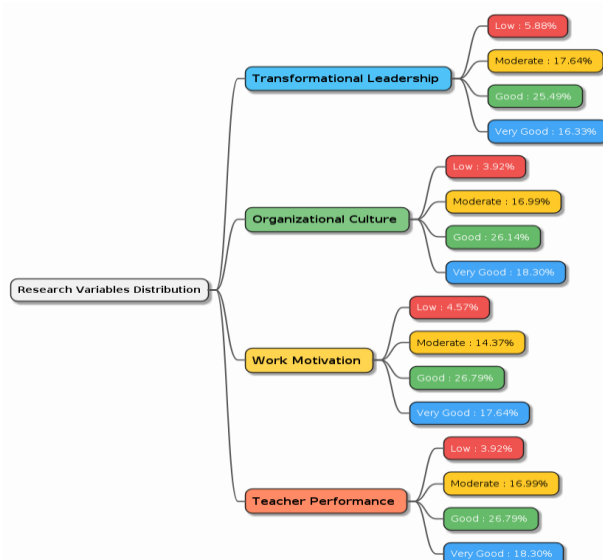


Figure 1. Distribution of Variable Categories

Figure 1 illustrates the categorical distribution of all research variables, revealing that the majority of respondents perceive their school environment positively across all dimensions. The visualization demonstrates that organizational culture and work motivation show slightly higher percentages in the good and very good categories compared to transformational leadership, suggesting that cultural factors may be more established than leadership practices in these vocational schools.

Direct Effects Analysis

The analysis of direct effects reveals significant relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Transformational Leadership demonstrates a correlation coefficient of 0.261 with Teacher Performance, indicating a low but statistically significant relationship. The t-test value of 3.329 exceeds the critical t-table value of 1.655, confirming that this relationship is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Organizational Culture shows a stronger direct relationship with Teacher Performance, with a correlation coefficient of 0.333. The statistical test yields a t-value of 3.329, which surpasses the critical value, establishing that organizational culture significantly influences teacher performance. This finding suggests that the shared values, norms, and practices within schools play a crucial role in shaping how teachers perform their duties.

Work Motivation exhibits a correlation coefficient of 0.355 with Teacher Performance, representing the strongest direct relationship among the three independent variables. The t-test result of 4.670 significantly exceeds the critical value of 1.655, confirming that motivated teachers tend to demonstrate higher performance levels. This indicates that internal drive and external incentives are powerful determinants of teaching effectiveness.

Table 2. Direct Effects of Variables on Teacher Performance

Relationship	Correlation	t-count	t-table	Contribution	Significance
Transformational Leadership → Teacher Performance	0.261	3.329	1.655	26.1%	Significant
Organizational Culture → Teacher Performance	0.333	3.329	1.655	33.3%	Significant
Work Motivation → Teacher Performance	0.355	4.670	1.655	35.5%	Significant

Table 2 presents the direct effects analysis showing that all three independent variables significantly influence teacher performance, with work motivation demonstrating the strongest effect at 35.5% contribution. The remaining variance of 64.5% is explained by other factors not included in this research model, suggesting that additional variables such as teaching competence, facilities, and administrative support may also play important roles in determining teacher performance outcomes.

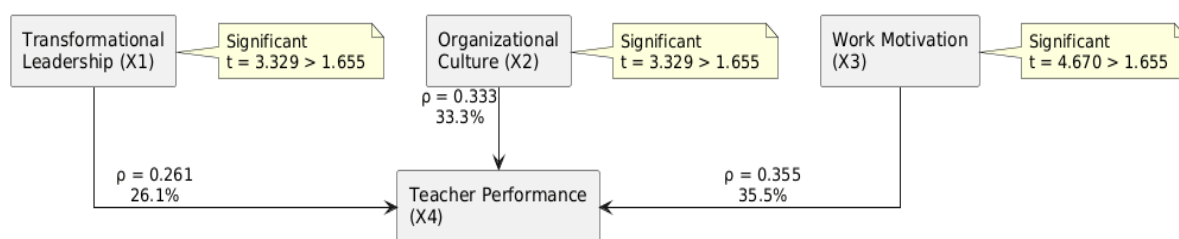


Figure 2. Path Diagram of Direct Effects

Figure 2 displays the path diagram illustrating the direct relationships between the independent variables and teacher performance. The diagram clearly shows that work motivation has the strongest direct path to teacher performance, followed by organizational culture and transformational leadership, indicating that interventions aimed at improving teacher performance should prioritize motivational strategies while also strengthening organizational culture and leadership practices.

Indirect Effects Analysis

The indirect effects analysis examines how transformational leadership and organizational culture influence teacher performance through work motivation as a mediating variable. Transformational Leadership demonstrates an indirect effect on Teacher Performance through

Work Motivation with a correlation coefficient of 0.388. The t-test value of 4.934 significantly exceeds the critical value of 1.655, confirming that work motivation successfully mediates the relationship between leadership and performance.

Organizational Culture exhibits an indirect effect on Teacher Performance through Work Motivation with a correlation coefficient of 0.367. The statistical analysis yields a t-value of 12.084, which dramatically surpasses the critical threshold, establishing that organizational culture significantly influences teacher performance through its impact on work motivation. This finding reveals that a strong organizational culture enhances motivation, which in turn improves performance.

The mediation analysis indicates that work motivation functions as a partial mediator rather than a complete mediator, as both direct and indirect effects remain statistically significant. This suggests that while motivation explains part of the relationship between leadership/culture and performance, these variables also influence performance through other mechanisms such as professional development, resource availability, and institutional support systems.

Table 3. Indirect Effects Through Work Motivation

Relationship Path	Correlation	t-count	t-table	Contribution	Significance
X1 → X3 → X4	0.388	4.934	1.655	38.8%	Significant
X2 → X3 → X4	0.367	12.084	1.655	36.7%	Significant

Table 3 reveals that the indirect effects through work motivation are substantial, with transformational leadership showing a slightly stronger mediated effect (38.8%) compared to organizational culture (36.7%). The remaining variance of 61.2% and 63.3% respectively indicates that other mediating variables such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and professional competence may also play important roles in explaining the complete causal mechanism between leadership, culture, and teacher performance.

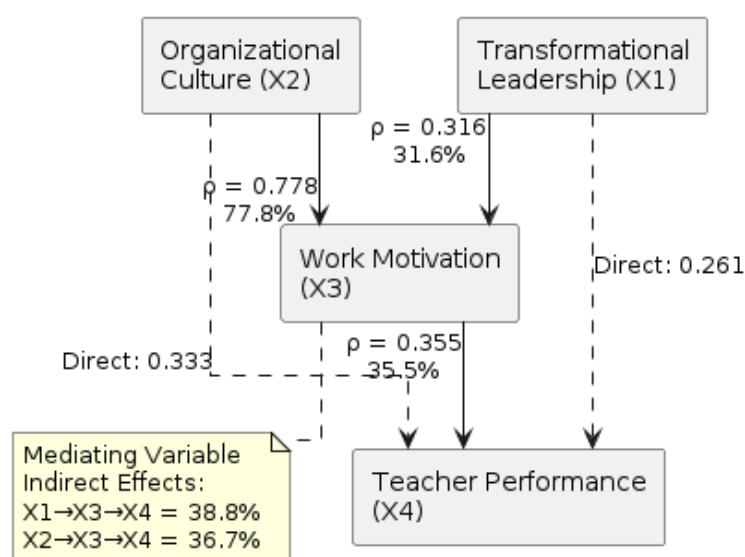


Figure 3. Mediation Model Diagram

Figure 3 illustrates the complete mediation model showing both direct and indirect pathways. The diagram emphasizes that organizational culture has an exceptionally strong influence on work motivation (77.8%), suggesting that cultural factors are the primary driver of teacher motivation in vocational schools. This finding implies that efforts to enhance teacher performance should focus on building a supportive organizational culture that naturally fosters high levels of work motivation.

Simultaneous Effects Analysis

The simultaneous effects analysis examines the combined influence of transformational leadership and organizational culture through work motivation on teacher performance. The results reveal a correlation coefficient of 0.400 when all variables operate together, indicating a moderate relationship. The t-test value of 4.725 significantly exceeds the critical value of 1.655, confirming that the simultaneous effect is statistically significant.

This finding demonstrates that the integration of transformational leadership practices, strong organizational culture, and high work motivation creates a synergistic effect that enhances teacher performance more effectively than any single variable operating independently. The combined contribution of 40.0% suggests that these three factors work together in a complementary manner to shape teaching effectiveness.

The remaining 60.0% of variance in teacher performance is attributed to other factors not included in this model, such as individual teacher competence, availability of teaching facilities, curriculum quality, student characteristics, and external environmental factors. This indicates that while leadership, culture, and motivation are important, comprehensive improvement in teacher performance requires attention to multiple dimensions of the educational ecosystem.

Table 4. Simultaneous Effects Analysis

Combined Variables	Correlation	t-count	t-table	Total Contribution	Remaining Variance
X1 + X2 → X3 → X4	0.400	4.725	1.655	40.0%	60.0%

Table 4 demonstrates that the simultaneous influence of transformational leadership and organizational culture through work motivation explains 40% of the variance in teacher performance, representing a meaningful but not exhaustive explanation. The substantial remaining variance of 60% highlights the complexity of factors influencing teacher performance and suggests that future research should incorporate additional variables such as professional development opportunities, teaching resources, administrative support, and student engagement levels to develop a more comprehensive understanding of performance determinants.

Figure 4 presents the complete structural equation model showing all relationships among variables. The diagram illustrates that organizational culture has the strongest influence on work motivation (0.778), while work motivation demonstrates the strongest direct effect on teacher performance (0.355). The model confirms that transformational leadership and organizational culture influence teacher performance both directly and indirectly through work motivation, validating the proposed theoretical framework and providing empirical support for the mediating role of motivation in the relationship between organizational factors and teaching effectiveness.

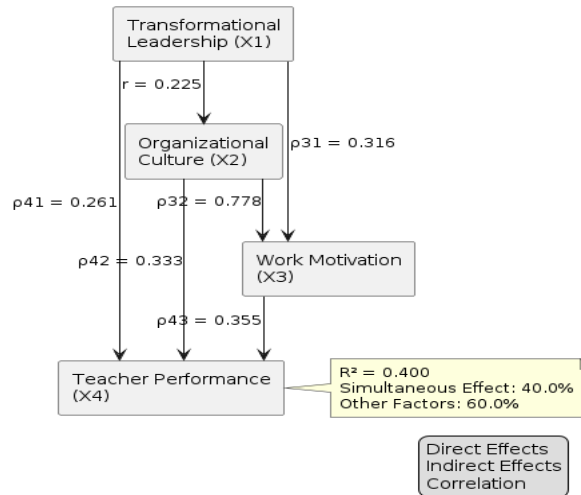


Figure 4. Complete Structural Model

Hypothesis Testing Summary

The comprehensive hypothesis testing reveals that all proposed hypotheses are supported by the empirical data. The first hypothesis stating that transformational leadership influences teacher performance is confirmed with a significant positive relationship. The second hypothesis proposing that transformational leadership affects work motivation is also validated, demonstrating that leadership practices significantly shape teacher motivation levels.

The third hypothesis asserting that organizational culture influences teacher performance receives strong support from the data, with organizational culture showing a moderate but significant effect. The fourth hypothesis proposing that organizational culture affects work motivation is strongly confirmed, with organizational culture demonstrating the strongest relationship (0.778) among all variable pairs in this study.

The fifth hypothesis stating that work motivation influences teacher performance is validated, confirming that motivated teachers perform better. The sixth and seventh hypotheses regarding indirect effects through work motivation are both supported, establishing work motivation as a significant mediating variable. The eighth hypothesis concerning simultaneous effects is confirmed, demonstrating that the integration of leadership, culture, and motivation produces a synergistic effect on teacher performance.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results Summary

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result	Significance
H1	X1 → X4	Accepted	Significant
H2	X1 → X3	Accepted	Significant
H3	X2 → X4	Accepted	Significant
H4	X2 → X3	Accepted	Significant
H5	X3 → X4	Accepted	Significant
H6	X1 → X3 → X4	Accepted	Significant
H7	X2 → X3 → X4	Accepted	Significant
H8	X1 + X2 → X3 → X4	Accepted	Significant

Table 5 summarizes the hypothesis testing results, showing that all eight hypotheses are accepted based on statistical significance. This comprehensive support for all hypotheses

strengthens the theoretical framework and provides robust empirical evidence for the proposed relationships. The consistent significance across all tests indicates that the model is well-specified and that the variables selected are appropriate for explaining teacher performance in vocational high schools.

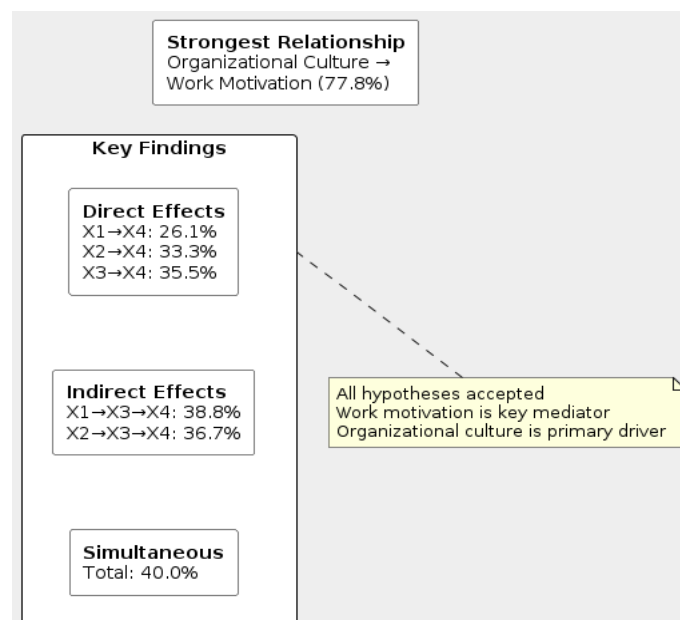


Figure 5, Research Findings Overview

Figure 5 provides a comprehensive overview of the research findings, highlighting that organizational culture has the strongest influence on work motivation at 77.8%, making it the primary driver in the model. The visualization emphasizes that work motivation serves as a crucial mediating variable, and that all hypotheses are accepted, providing strong empirical support for the theoretical framework. The findings suggest that interventions to improve teacher performance should prioritize strengthening organizational culture while simultaneously developing transformational leadership practices to maximize work motivation and ultimately enhance teaching effectiveness in vocational high schools.

The empirical results confirm that transformational leadership exerts a significant direct and indirect influence on teacher performance, consistent with recent educational management research. Salenussa et al. (2024) demonstrated that principals' transformational leadership positively and significantly enhances teacher performance by fostering intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, which are particularly critical in vocational environments where adaptive and industry-aligned instruction is required. Several previous studies further confirm that inspirational motivation and idealized influence serve as fundamental drivers that enhance teachers' professional commitment, teaching innovation, and classroom effectiveness (Ghamrawi et al., 2024; Journal et al., 2026; Nassir & Benoliel, 2025; Wigati, 2025; Zainal & Mohd Matore, 2021). In the context of SMKN in Tebing Tinggi, these findings suggest that principals who consistently articulate a clear educational vision, model ethical conduct, and encourage pedagogical experimentation can effectively bridge administrative expectations with classroom execution. This aligns with contemporary vocational education literature emphasizing that leadership must transcend routine supervision to become a catalyst for continuous professional development and instructional quality.

Organizational culture emerges as a predominant determinant in shaping both teacher motivation and performance, surpassing the direct impact of leadership alone. Several

previous studies have reported that a cohesive organizational culture significantly improves teacher performance by establishing shared norms of collaboration, accountability, and continuous pedagogical improvement (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Hafizi & Cinantya, 2025; Plaku & Leka, 2025; Riza et al., 2025). Hartawan et al. (2024) similarly identified that vocational schools with strong cultural foundations exhibit higher teacher engagement due to standardized expectations, mutual support systems, and clear professional benchmarks. In Tebing Tinggi's SMK context, the pronounced influence of culture on motivation (77.8%) indicates that institutional values, disciplinary routines, and collaborative practices create a psychological ecosystem where teachers feel structurally and emotionally supported. Consequently, culture functions not merely as an environmental backdrop but as an active internalization mechanism that sustains long-term performance consistency and professional identity.

Work motivation operates as a critical amplifying mechanism that translates organizational and leadership inputs into tangible performance outcomes. Belay & Melesse (2024) and Li et al (2025) emphasized that intrinsic and extrinsic motivational drivers significantly predict teacher performance, particularly when aligned with professional development pathways, recognition systems, and autonomy in instructional design. Hakim & Mulyanti (2025) further validated that motivated teachers demonstrate higher instructional creativity, classroom management efficacy, and student engagement, which are essential in competency-based vocational training. The present study's finding that motivation mediates and amplifies the effects of leadership and culture aligns with Pangestuti & Sari's (2025) assertion that motivation transforms structural support into sustained professional effort. In SMK settings, where technical instruction demands high cognitive and practical engagement, motivation serves as the psychological engine that converts institutional policies into consistent pedagogical execution and industry-relevant skill transfer.

The simultaneous interaction of transformational leadership, organizational culture, and work motivation yields a synergistic effect that collectively explains 40% of the variance in teacher performance, underscoring the multidimensional nature of educational effectiveness. Several previous studies have argued that leadership and cultural variables only achieve optimal impact when integrated with motivational strategies that address professional autonomy and institutional alignment (Adinew, 2023; Tyagi, 2021). This synergistic model is particularly relevant in vocational education, where several previous studies have highlighted the importance of aligning teacher competencies with dynamic industry demands through a collaborative school culture and visionary leadership (Kamara & Burhanuddin, 2025; Liyustari et al., 2025; Mincu, 2022). Knight & Parker (2021) and Lupşa et al (2020) further confirmed that combined organizational interventions produce stronger performance outcomes than isolated variable improvements. In Tebing Tinggi's SMK environment, this implies that performance enhancement cannot rely on leadership initiatives or cultural reforms alone; rather, it requires a coordinated ecosystem where visionary leadership cultivates a supportive culture, which in turn activates sustained teacher motivation toward vocational excellence.

These findings contribute to educational management theory by repositioning work motivation as an amplifying variable rather than a passive mediator, while highlighting organizational culture as the primary architect of motivational climates in vocational schools. This challenges conventional leadership-centric models and supports a layered mediation framework where cultural systems dictate the efficacy of leadership interventions. Practically, the results suggest that SMK administrators in Tebing Tinggi should prioritize culture-building initiatives such as professional learning communities, transparent communication

protocols, and industry-aligned value systems before implementing standalone leadership development programs. Furthermore, motivation-enhancing strategies must be contextually tailored to vocational teachers' unique demands, including technical certification support, workshop resource allocation, and structured industry partnership integration. By adopting this integrated approach, vocational institutions can transform structural and psychological inputs into measurable improvements in teacher performance, ultimately strengthening the critical linkage between education quality and workforce readiness in the vocational sector.

Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that teacher performance in public vocational high schools in Tebing Tinggi City is significantly shaped by the synergistic interplay of principals' transformational leadership, organizational culture, and work motivation, with motivation functioning as a critical amplifying mechanism rather than a passive mediator. Empirical results reveal that organizational culture exerts the strongest direct influence on teacher motivation (77.8%), substantially outweighing the impact of transformational leadership (31.6%), thereby shifting the primary locus of influence from individual leadership behaviors to systemic organizational values. While direct effects of leadership and culture on performance remain moderate (26.1% and 33.3%, respectively), their indirect pathways through motivation yield substantially higher explanatory power (38.8% and 36.7%, respectively), culminating in a simultaneous model that accounts for 40.0% of performance variance. These findings validate a layered mediation framework and underscore that in vocational education contexts, leadership effectiveness is inherently contextual, contingent upon a robust organizational culture that actively cultivates and sustains teacher motivation. Consequently, the study advances educational management theory by repositioning motivation as a dynamic amplifier and highlighting organizational culture as the foundational driver of pedagogical effectiveness in SMK settings.

Building on these findings, several strategic recommendations are proposed for both academic inquiry and educational practice. Future research should expand the theoretical model by incorporating additional determinants such as instructional leadership, teacher pedagogical competence, professional welfare, and vocational-specific infrastructure, while employing longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to capture causal dynamics and mitigate self-report biases. Methodologically, subsequent studies are encouraged to develop context-sensitive instruments that explicitly measure vocational performance indicators, including industry partnership engagement, project-based learning implementation, and technical certification outcomes. Practically, school administrators and regional education authorities should prioritize systemic culture-building initiatives such as fostering collaborative professional learning communities, institutionalizing merit-based recognition, and aligning school values with industry standards before implementing isolated leadership development programs. By integrating visionary leadership with a deliberately cultivated organizational ecosystem, vocational institutions can transform structural and psychological inputs into sustained pedagogical excellence, ultimately strengthening the critical linkage between teacher performance and graduate workforce readiness in the Industry 4.0 era.

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