



Enhancing Vocational School Graduates' Work Readiness through Principal Leadership Strategies: A SWOT Analysis Approach

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to analyze the principal's leadership strategy based on SWOT analysis to improve the work readiness of vocational high school graduates. A qualitative case study design was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving the principal, teachers, school management, industry partners, and alumni. Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's model, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that the school's strengths lie in transformational leadership, industrial-based learning through internships, and the development of students' work culture. However, weaknesses in students' technical competencies and limited facilities were identified. External opportunities include industry partnerships and government support, while threats involve limited job availability and a mismatch between graduates' competencies and labor market demands. The SWOT-based leadership strategy adopted by the principal proves effective in enhancing soft skills, but less so in improving technical skills. This study contributes to the development of a strategic leadership model in vocational education, particularly in resource-constrained contexts, and emphasizes the importance of aligning school programs with industry needs.

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INTRODUCTION

Vocational education plays a crucial role in preparing a competent and work-ready workforce (Yoto et al., 2024). In the current global economy, the demand for skilled workers is growing (Li, 2024), with industries seeking graduates who can meet their needs. However, numerous studies have shown that there is a significant gap between the competencies of vocational graduates and the expectations of industries, often referred to as the "skills mismatch"

(OECD, 2023). This issue highlights that improving graduate employability is not solely dependent on curriculum design, but also on the effective leadership of educational institutions. Strong leadership can ensure that vocational programs are more closely aligned with labor market needs, thereby enhancing the employability of graduates (Okolie et al., 2020). Research indicates that schools with strategic leadership practices are more successful in fostering industry-relevant skills among students. Thus, this study is crucial as it examines the leadership practices in vocational schools, which can directly impact workforce readiness.

The persistent mismatch between vocational education outcomes and industry expectations presents a pressing challenge (Müller, 2024; Mason, 2020). As industries evolve and require more specialized skills, vocational institutions must adapt to these changes to provide students with the competencies needed in the labor market (Schweri et al., 2020; Pambudi & Harjanto, 2020). However, many vocational schools face challenges in bridging this gap. This mismatch often results in graduates who are technically proficient but lack the soft skills or real-world experience that employers seek. Additionally, outdated curricula and insufficient partnerships with industry further exacerbate the problem (Jaiswal, 2023; Arthur-Mensah, 2020). This issue affects not only the employability of graduates but also the competitiveness of the workforce, thus hindering economic growth and development. Therefore, addressing this issue is essential for improving the alignment between education and labor market needs, particularly through enhanced leadership in vocational institutions.

In vocational schools, one significant phenomenon observed is the reliance on outdated teaching methods and limited industry engagement, which contribute to the growing skills mismatch. Many vocational institutions still primarily focus on theoretical knowledge, with insufficient emphasis on practical skills development and industry-relevant experiences (Zhao & Ko, 2024). Internships and work-based learning are often inadequately implemented or not aligned with the real demands of the labor market. Despite the increasing push for partnerships between schools and industries (Ubaidah et al., 2021), many schools lack effective strategies to foster these collaborations. Consequently, students are inadequately prepared for the dynamic demands of the workforce. The gap in technical skills, combined with a lack of exposure to real work environments, leaves many graduates unprepared for the challenges they face upon entering the job market.

Several studies have examined the relationship between leadership practices and the development of vocational students' competencies (Bibi et al., 2023). Transformational leadership has been identified as a key factor in enhancing organizational performance and fostering innovation in educational

settings. Transformational leaders are seen as individuals who can inspire, motivate (Khan et al., 2025), and guide their teams to embrace change and align their efforts with strategic goals. In the context of vocational education, this leadership style is particularly crucial for adapting to the evolving needs of the labor market. However, research integrating transformational leadership with strategic frameworks like SWOT analysis in vocational education remains limited. While previous studies emphasize leadership's role in promoting educational outcomes, few have explored how SWOT-based strategies can address the specific challenges vocational institutions face in aligning their programs with industry demands.

Furthermore, SWOT analysis has been widely applied in strategic management to assess the internal strengths and weaknesses of an organization, as well as external opportunities and threats. In educational contexts, SWOT analysis has been used to evaluate school performance and identify areas for improvement. However, the integration of transformational leadership with SWOT analysis in vocational education is a relatively underexplored area (Xu et al., 2025). The limited research on this topic indicates a significant gap in understanding how leadership strategies, when combined with SWOT analysis, can help improve the employability of vocational graduates. This gap highlights the importance of exploring this intersection to develop more effective leadership strategies that can align vocational education programs with industry needs and enhance graduate employability.

This study introduces a novel approach by integrating transformational leadership theory with SWOT-based strategic management to improve vocational education outcomes (Naamati-Schneider & Salvatore, 2026). While previous studies have examined either leadership practices or SWOT analysis separately, few have combined these frameworks in the context of vocational education. By focusing on the role of leadership in enhancing both soft and technical skills through strategic management, this study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature. The integration of industry-based learning and leadership strategies can lead to more effective vocational education systems that not only address current workforce demands but also adapt to future changes in the labor market. Thus, this study is of significant importance as it contributes to the development of a strategic leadership model that can be applied in resource-constrained regions with limited industry development.

This study aims to analyze internal and external factors influencing vocational graduates' work readiness, particularly through the lens of SWOT-based leadership strategies. The research will focus on how internal strengths, such as transformational leadership, and external opportunities, such as industry partnerships, can be leveraged to enhance graduate employability. While

previous research has shown the importance of leadership and industry linkages in vocational education, there is still limited understanding of how these elements can be strategically integrated to address the skills mismatch. This study contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive framework that combines transformational leadership and SWOT analysis to improve the alignment between vocational education and labor market demands. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for educational leaders, policymakers, and industry partners seeking to enhance the employability of vocational graduates.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of leadership practices in a real-world context. The case study approach was chosen because it allows for a detailed exploration of complex phenomena within their natural settings (Yin, 2018). A case study design is particularly effective when examining the processes and strategies implemented by school leaders to enhance work readiness among vocational graduates, as it enables the researcher to investigate the interplay between leadership practices and outcomes within a specific institutional context.

The research was conducted at SMKN 1 Pringgabaya, a vocational high school that provides an opportunity to study the leadership practices in a real vocational education setting. The location was chosen due to its relevance in offering vocational programs and its active involvement in industry partnerships, making it an ideal site to examine how school leadership strategies align with industry needs. By selecting this school, the study can provide valuable insights into the practical applications of leadership strategies in improving student employability and work readiness.

Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that key stakeholders such as the principal, vice principals, productive teachers, career center (BKK) staff, industry partners, and alumni were included in the study. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative analysis, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). This approach allows for systematic organization and interpretation of qualitative data to identify key themes and patterns related to leadership strategies and their impact on work readiness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings indicate that transformational leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing students' work readiness. The principal demonstrates the ability to inspire, motivate, and direct school members toward achieving industry-oriented learning outcomes. Additionally, the development of students' work

culture—such as discipline, responsibility, and adaptability—reflects the strong influence of leadership on behavioral outcomes. However, the study also reveals a persistent gap in students' technical competencies. The limitation of teaching factory implementation, which is still largely simulation-based, further reduces students' exposure to real industrial practices.

The study identifies several external opportunities, including partnerships with industries, government support programs, and the presence of a school-based career center (BKK). These factors play a strategic role in facilitating the transition from school to work. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these opportunities is constrained by structural challenges. Limited job availability and dependency on industry demand remain critical issues. Additionally, the mismatch between graduates' competencies and industry requirements indicates that the "link and match" concept has not been fully realized.

The implementation of SWOT-based leadership strategies shows that the principal has adopted a strategic approach in managing both internal and external factors. The integration of strengths and opportunities is evident in the strengthening of internship programs and industry partnerships. However, the study also reveals that the current strategy is more effective in improving soft skills than technical competencies. This imbalance suggests that the integration between school-based learning and industry practices is still limited.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the role of transformational leadership in vocational education. As highlighted in previous studies, transformational leadership has been shown to significantly improve organizational performance and learning effectiveness. The principal's ability to inspire and motivate school members, directing them toward industry-relevant outcomes (Madi et al., 2026), supports the view that leadership plays a central role in shaping students' work readiness. This is consistent with the broader concept that leadership in educational settings should not only focus on academic achievements but also on fostering non-technical skills that are highly valued in the labor market.

However, the study also reveals a gap in students' technical competencies, which stands in contrast to the growing emphasis on industry-oriented skills in vocational education. This finding highlights the challenge of implementing effective teaching methods that bridge the gap between theoretical learning and real-world applications (Fantinelli et al., 2024). While transformational leadership is effective in enhancing soft skills and work culture, the lack of exposure to authentic industrial environments remains a significant barrier. The current reliance on simulation-based teaching factories fails to provide the hands-on experience required to develop practical competencies that meet industry standards.

The external opportunities identified in the study, including industry partnerships and government support, are in line with the growing recognition of the need for stronger linkages between education and industry (O'Dwyer, Filieri & O'Malley, 2023; Mian et al., 2020). These opportunities provide a strategic avenue for schools to enhance their curricula and ensure that students gain the skills demanded by the labor market. However, the effectiveness of these opportunities is hindered by structural challenges such as limited job availability and the mismatch between graduate competencies and employer needs. This highlights the importance of not only strengthening partnerships but also addressing labor market constraints to improve the absorption of vocational graduates.

The study's findings also emphasize the importance of integrating soft and technical skills in vocational education. While the principal's leadership strategies have been effective in enhancing soft skills, the focus on technical skills needs further attention. The lack of balance between soft and technical skills suggests that vocational schools need to develop a more holistic approach to curriculum design that incorporates both aspects equally. This imbalance could limit graduates' ability to meet the full spectrum of industry requirements (Goulart et al., 2022), making it crucial for schools to reassess how they integrate work-based learning with technical education.

In terms of theoretical implications, the study supports the argument that leadership in vocational education should go beyond administrative functions and become a driving force in aligning educational outcomes with labor market demands. The combination of transformational leadership and SWOT analysis offers a unique framework for understanding how schools can strategically manage internal and external factors to enhance student employability (Chsherbakova et al., 2025). Practically, this suggests that school leaders should adopt more strategic approaches that integrate industry feedback and continuously adapt their programs to evolving labor market trends.

Lastly, the study contributes to the literature by highlighting the need for more strategic collaboration between schools and industries. A more systemic and structured partnership is required to ensure that both soft and technical skills are developed in a balanced manner. This collaboration should go beyond internships and include more integrated work-based learning experiences (Lee, 2025), real-world industry projects, and active engagement with industry partners in curriculum development. By addressing the identified gaps and imbalances, vocational education can better equip graduates for successful careers in an ever-changing labor market.

CONCLUSION

The key finding of this study is that SWOT-based principal leadership plays a significant role in enhancing vocational graduates' work readiness. Transformational leadership positively influences the development of students'

soft skills, but technical competencies remain a challenge. The study highlights the importance of integrating industry practices into school programs to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world applications. This integration is crucial for improving the overall competitiveness of graduates in the labor market. While this study contributes to the academic understanding of leadership strategies in vocational education, its limitations lie in its qualitative approach, which may not fully capture the broader impacts of these strategies across diverse contexts. Future research should adopt quantitative methodologies and explore a wider range of institutions to validate and generalize the findings. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership and industry integration can enhance vocational education outcomes globally.

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