Leading with Flexibility: How Situational Leadership Builds Work Climate and Teacher Professionalism in Early Childhood Education

Khoirun Nisak[1*], Ali Formen[1], Edi Waluyo[1]

[1] Faculty of Education and Pyschology, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia.

Abstract: eacher professionalism is a critical determinant of educational quality, yet it is often influenced by leadership practices and the prevailing work climate in schools. This study addresses the problem of limited empirical evidence regarding how situational leadership contributes to teacher professionalism through the mediating role of work climate in early childhood education. The research aimed to analyze the direct and indirect effects of principals' situational leadership on teacher professionalism at *Raudlatul Athfal Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama Payaman*, Magelang Regency. A quantitative explanatory design was employed involving 88 teachers selected through simple random sampling. Data were collected using validated Likert-scale questionnaires and analyzed through descriptive statistics, path analysis, and the Sobel test to examine mediation effects. The results showed that situational leadership significantly affected work climate ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < .001$) and teacher professionalism ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$). Work climate also had a significant mediating effect ($\beta = 0.25$, Sobel $z = 3.90$, $p < .001$), explaining 64% of the variance in teacher professionalism ($R^2 = 0.64$). The study concludes that adaptive situational leadership strengthens teacher professionalism both directly and indirectly by creating a positive, collaborative, and supportive work climate.

Keywords: Mediation; Path analysis; Situational leadership; Teacher professionalism; Work climate

Introduction

Education in the twenty-first century is recognized as a dynamic system that requires adaptive leadership to maintain continuous professional growth among teachers. Teacher professionalism represents the foundation of educational quality and sustainable learning achievement (Atasoy, 2023; Bijl et al., 2025). The effectiveness of teaching practice and professional responsibility is strongly influenced by the leadership behavior of school principals who play strategic roles in shaping organizational culture and work climate (Li et al., 2024). In early childhood education, leadership becomes crucial because teaching involves emotional sensitivity, pedagogical flexibility, and intensive social interaction that depend on effective support and direction from school leaders (Devana et al., 2025; Safrida et al., 2025).

Leadership theories have evolved toward adaptability and situational responsiveness. The situational leadership model developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969) explains that leadership effectiveness depends on the leader's ability to adjust behavioral styles according to subordinates' readiness, competence, and motivation. Empirical studies demonstrate that situational leadership enhances teacher motivation, professional commitment, and classroom performance in various educational contexts (Devana et al., 2025;

Fitriatin, 2021; Indah et al., 2023; Safrida et al., 2025). In practice, this leadership model enables principals to align instructional strategies and supervision approaches with teachers' developmental needs, encouraging collaboration and pedagogical innovation (Chabib et al., 2025; Thompson et al., 2015). Adaptive leadership that combines directive and supportive behaviors fosters trust, collegiality, and a sense of professional accountability (Mwaisaka et al., 2019).

Leadership effectiveness is reflected through the school's work climate, which determines the extent to which teachers feel valued, supported, and motivated. A positive climate characterized by trust, open communication, and collegial collaboration strengthens teacher professionalism and organizational commitment (Ma et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2024). Evidence from national and international research indicates that principals who promote inclusive, participative, and supportive climates achieve higher levels of teacher job satisfaction and performance (Ahmar et al., 2024; Lubis et al., 2025). Work climate functions as a psychological mechanism linking leadership behavior with teacher outcomes, creating conditions that sustain professional learning and innovation (Karakose et al., 2025; Li et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence focusing on the relationship between situational leadership, work climate, and teacher professionalism in early childhood education institutions remains limited. Studies by Sari et al. (2022), Mustika et al. (2022), and Taufiqurahman et al. (2025) revealed that adaptive leadership in early education improves collaboration and instructional quality. These studies, however, rarely tested the mediating effect of work climate statistically, particularly within Raudlatul Athfal (RA) institutions that operate with simple organizational structures and rely heavily on the principal's leadership. The contextual uniqueness of RA institutions highlights the necessity of examining whether work climate functions as a significant mediator between situational leadership and teacher professionalism.

Previous research in primary and secondary education confirms the positive influence of leadership on teacher professionalism (Aditmara et al., 2022; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Nuryati, 2023). These studies often focused on general leadership constructs without distinguishing situational styles or testing causal mechanisms. Many relied on descriptive or correlational designs that could not identify the mediating pathways between variables. Quantitative explanatory designs employing path analysis and Sobel tests are required to validate both direct and indirect relationships empirically (Huang et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). This methodological approach allows for a rigorous explanation of how situational leadership contributes to

teacher professionalism through the formation of a supportive work climate.

The present study contributes to the theoretical extension of situational leadership theory by applying it to early childhood education contexts in Indonesia. The integration of leadership adaptability, work climate, and professionalism into a single mediation model provides new insight into how flexible leadership strengthens teachers' professional competence and responsibility (Yılmaz et al., 2025). The results are expected to advance theoretical discussions on contextualized leadership and contribute practical implications for leadership training and professional development programs for early childhood institutions.

This research aims to analyze the level of situational leadership practice of the principal at Raudlatul Athfal Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama Payaman, to determine the influence of situational leadership on work climate, and to examine the mediating effect of work climate on teacher professionalism. The study holds urgency for both theory and practice by offering empirical evidence on how adaptive leadership strengthens teacher professionalism through the establishment of a collaborative and supportive organizational climate. The findings are expected to inform policy formulation, leadership development, and capacity-building programs to enhance the quality of early childhood education in Indonesia.

Method

Research Type

This study applied a quantitative explanatory design to examine the causal relationships among situational leadership, work climate, and teacher professionalism. The explanatory approach was selected because it provides empirical evidence of both direct and indirect influences among variables. The research model tested the pathways from situational leadership to teacher professionalism through work climate as a mediating variable. The quantitative design also enabled the use of statistical models to verify theoretical propositions derived from leadership and organizational climate frameworks.

To provide a clearer overview of the methodological procedures, a research methodology flowchart was developed to illustrate each stage of the study systematically. The figure 1 illustrates the sequential stages of the quantitative explanatory research process, showing how the study progressed from the formulation of variables, instrument validation, and data collection to statistical analysis and interpretation of the findings.
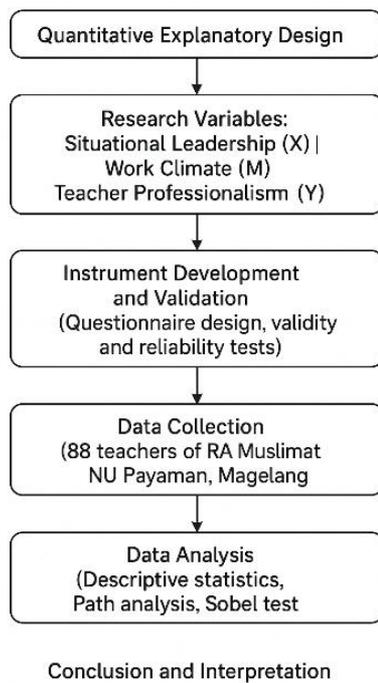
Figure 1. Quantitative explanatory research flowchart

Time and Location of the Research

The research was conducted from August to November 2024 at *Raudlatul Athfal Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama Payaman*, located in Magelang Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. The institution was chosen as the research site because it implements adaptive leadership practices and has an established system for professional teacher development. The time frame allowed sufficient duration for data collection, validation, and verification processes in accordance with ethical and procedural standards.

Participants and Sampling

The population consisted of 100 active teachers employed during the 2024/2025 academic year. The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula with a 5% margin of error, resulting in a minimum requirement of 80 participants. To ensure representativeness, 88 teachers were selected using simple random sampling, allowing each teacher an equal opportunity to be included. This sampling strategy was appropriate because the population was relatively homogeneous in terms of teaching experience and job structure.

Variables and Measures

Three main variables were investigated: (a) Situational Leadership (X): Based on Hersey and Blanchard's model, covering directive, coaching, participative, and delegative styles. Indicators included leadership adaptability, instructional adjustment, professional support, and appropriate delegation. (b) Work Climate (M): Measured through perceptions of safety, openness of communication, collegial support, and collaboration. (c) Teacher Professionalism (Y): Based on the Indonesian Teacher Law (UU No. 14/2005) and professional competency standards, including mastery of subject matter, classroom management, innovation, continuous professional development, and involvement in professional organizations.

Research Instruments

Each variable was measured using a Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The instrument was developed through expert judgment for content validity, followed by empirical validation using item-total correlation. Reliability was tested with Cronbach's Alpha, with ≥ 0.70 as the acceptance threshold.

Table 1. Research Instrument Grid

Variable	Dimension / Indicator	Example Item	Scale
Situational Leadership (X)	Leadership adaptability	The principal adjusts leadership style according to teachers' conditions	1–5
	Instruction adjustment	The principal gives instructions according to teacher readiness	1–5
	Professional support	The principal provides continuous professional guidance	1–5
	Delegation of authority	Tasks are delegated according to teacher capacity	1–5
	Directive style (telling)	The principal gives clear, direct instructions when needed	1–5
	Coaching style (selling)	The principal motivates and trains teachers facing difficulties	1–5
	Participative style	Teachers are involved in school decision-making	1–5
	Delegative style	Teachers independently carry out tasks assigned by the principal	1–5
Work Climate (M)	Safety	I feel safe physically and psychologically at school	1–5
	Communication openness	Communication among staff is open and honest	1–5
	Professional support	I receive support from colleagues and the principal	1–5
	Collaboration	Teachers collaborate in planning and reviewing lessons	1–5
	Social relations	Relations among teachers and staff are harmonious	1–5
	Emotional support	I feel valued and listened to at work	1–5

Variable		Dimension / Indicator	Example Item	Scale
Teacher Professionalism (Y)		Mastery of subject matter	I master the lessons I teach	1–5
		Classroom management	I manage the learning process effectively	1–5
		Evaluation	I evaluate students' learning objectively	1–5
		Self-development	I regularly attend training/workshops	1–5
		Training participation	I actively participate in professional training	1–5
		Innovation	I develop and apply innovative teaching methods	1–5
		Professional organization	I am active in teacher professional associations	1–5
		Professional responsibility	I carry out teaching tasks according to professional standards	1–5

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through a structured and systematic process to ensure validity and reliability. The primary instrument consisted of a closed-ended questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale designed to measure situational leadership, work climate, and teacher professionalism. Each item was developed through a review of relevant theories and previous studies, followed by expert validation from three specialists in educational leadership and early childhood education. The validation process ensured that the questionnaire items represented the conceptual dimensions of each variable accurately.

Before the main survey, a pilot test was administered to 20 teachers who were not part of the main sample. The pilot results confirmed the clarity and readability of the items, with Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.70 for all constructs, indicating internal consistency. After the validation stage, the final version of the questionnaire was distributed to 88 teachers through a direct face-to-face administration at *Raudlatul Athfal Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama Payaman*. Respondents were given clear explanations about the purpose of the research and assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

Data collection was conducted over a period of four weeks during regular working hours to minimize response bias. Completed questionnaires were immediately checked for completeness and accuracy before being processed for coding and statistical analysis. The entire data collection procedure followed ethical standards by obtaining formal permission from the institution and written consent from all participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a sequence of quantitative procedures designed to ensure statistical validity and theoretical accuracy. The process began with descriptive statistics to identify the general tendencies of respondents' perceptions regarding situational leadership, work climate, and teacher professionalism. The mean scores, standard deviations, and categorical interpretations were calculated to classify the variables into low, medium, or high levels.

Classical assumption tests were conducted to ensure the suitability of data for regression analysis. Normality was examined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, multicollinearity was tested through tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) values, and heteroscedasticity was checked using the Glejser test. The results confirmed that the data met the assumptions required for further analysis.

Path analysis was employed to test the hypothesized direct and indirect relationships among variables. The analysis estimated the standardized path coefficients (β) and their corresponding significance levels using a 0.05 alpha threshold. The mediation role of work climate was examined using the Sobel test to determine whether the indirect effect between situational leadership and teacher professionalism was statistically significant.

The analytical model produced both direct and indirect effect coefficients, as well as the total contribution of situational leadership and work climate to teacher professionalism, expressed through the coefficient of determination (R^2). The interpretation of the path coefficients provided empirical evidence regarding the strength and direction of relationships among variables. Statistical computations were performed using SPSS version 30.0, ensuring accuracy, reliability, and replicability of the findings.

Result and Discussion

Result

The descriptive analysis shows that the mean scores of the three variables were in the high category (mean > 4 on a five-point scale). This indicates that the principal's situational leadership, the work climate, and teacher professionalism are perceived positively by the respondents. Before conducting further hypothesis testing, descriptive analysis was carried out to identify the general tendency of respondents' perceptions regarding the study variables. The results, including mean scores, standard deviations, and categorical interpretations, are presented in Table 2.

The descriptive statistics indicate that the three main variables of the study—situational leadership,

work climate, and teacher professionalism—are all perceived at a high level by respondents.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Category
Situational Leadership (X)	4.12	0.49	High
Work Climate (M)	4.05	0.52	High
Teacher Professionalism (Y)	4.18	0.47	High

Situational Leadership (M = 4.12, SD = 0.49) This suggests that the principal of RA Muslimat NU Payaman is consistently perceived as applying adaptive leadership styles. The relatively low standard deviation shows that most teachers share a similar perception, reinforcing that the leadership approach is stable and widely experienced by staff.

Work Climate (M = 4.05, SD = 0.52) the high mean score reflects a generally positive and supportive school climate. Teachers feel that the environment is safe, communicative, and collaborative. However, compared to other variables, work climate has the highest standard deviation, indicating a slightly more diverse perception among teachers regarding the quality of the work environment.

Teacher Professionalism (M = 4.18, SD = 0.47) Teacher professionalism obtained the highest mean score among the three variables. This demonstrates that teachers show strong competence in pedagogy, self-development, and professional responsibility. The relatively small SD also implies that professionalism is consistently maintained across teachers.

Reliability and Validity Tests

The research instruments were proven to be reliable, with Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.70. Construct validity was also achieved, with Construct Reliability (CR) values above 0.70 and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values above 0.50. Following the descriptive analysis, reliability and validity of the research instruments were tested. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, while construct validity was examined through Construct Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Reliability and Validity of Instruments

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Situational Leadership (X)	0.91	0.92	0.63
Work Climate (M)	0.88	0.89	0.57
Teacher Professionalism (Y)	0.93	0.94	0.68

The reliability and validity tests confirm that all instruments are statistically sound (Table 3). Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.88 to 0.93, well above the 0.70 threshold. Construct Reliability (CR) values

between 0.89 and 0.94 further demonstrate strong internal consistency. Meanwhile, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.57 to 0.68, exceeding the 0.50 cutoff, which indicates adequate convergent validity. Teacher professionalism exhibited the highest reliability (α = 0.93, CR = 0.94, AVE = 0.68), showing that its indicators are particularly robust. Overall, these findings ensure that the measurement instruments validly and reliably capture each construct, making them suitable for further structural analysis.

Path Analysis

Path analysis was applied to test the structural relationships among situational leadership, work climate, and teacher professionalism. The analysis aimed to determine both the direct and indirect effects of situational leadership on teacher professionalism through the mediating role of work climate. The standardized path coefficients (β) and corresponding significance levels were used to evaluate the strength and direction of each relationship within the model. Table 4 displays the statistical results of the path analysis, including direct, indirect, and total effects, which collectively illustrate the contribution of each variable to the overall structural model.

Table 4. Path Analysis Results

Path	Coefficient (β)	p-value	Note
X → M	0.62	<.001	Significant
M → Y	0.41	<.001	Significant
X → Y (direct)	0.35	<.001	Significant
X → Y (indirect via M)	0.25	<.001	Significant
X → Y (total)	0.60	<.001	Significant

Path analysis results (Table 4) reveal that situational leadership has a strong and significant influence on work climate (β = 0.62, p < .001). Work climate, in turn, positively affects teacher professionalism (β = 0.41, p < .001). Situational leadership also directly contributes to teacher professionalism (β = 0.35, p < .001). Furthermore, the indirect effect of situational leadership on teacher professionalism through work climate is significant (β = 0.25, Sobel z = 3.90, p < .001). The total effect (direct + indirect) of situational leadership on professionalism is 0.60, confirming that both direct and mediated pathways play important roles. The model explains 64% of the variance in teacher professionalism (R^2 = 0.64), indicating substantial explanatory power.

Discussion
The Influence of Situational Leadership on Work Climate

Situational leadership refers to the ability of leaders to modify their behavior according to the readiness, competence, and motivation of subordinates. The theory developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969) identifies

four principal leadership styles: directive, coaching, participative, and delegative. Each style corresponds to different levels of teacher maturity and contextual demands. The adaptability of a school principal in selecting an appropriate leadership style determines how teachers perceive fairness, communication, and organizational support. The findings of this research indicate a significant effect of situational leadership on work climate (β = 0.62, p < .001). Teachers who experience adaptive leadership perceive their school as a safe, collegial, and communicative workplace, demonstrating that leadership flexibility is central to developing a constructive work environment.

A growing body of evidence confirms that adaptive leadership positively influences work climate in educational institutions. Fitriatin (2021) reported that flexible leadership increases teacher motivation and collaboration in Indonesian schools. Denee et al. (2017) found that effective early childhood leaders engage in practices such as mentoring, coaching, and building relational trust among teachers, which strengthens collaboration and collective professional learning. Similarly, Fonsén et al. (2022) showed that distributed and collaborative pedagogical leadership enhances relationships, trust, and teamwork among educators in early childhood education settings, particularly through shared decision-making and supportive leadership behaviors that empower teachers. Together, these findings suggest that combining directive and supportive leadership behaviors is key to fostering teamwork and trust within early childhood education contexts. Zhu et al. (2023) demonstrated that leadership approaches based on goal-setting and adaptability improve teacher performance and satisfaction through the creation of positive climates. Ma et al. (2024) and Sun et al. (2024) revealed that open communication and mutual respect within leadership practices generate psychological security and cooperation among teachers. Yani (2025) identified that supportive learning environments guided by responsive leadership enhance teacher engagement and professional initiative. These convergent findings affirm that situational leadership acts as a determining factor in shaping a healthy school climate.

The correlation between situational leadership and work climate supports the theoretical premise that leadership effectiveness operates through organizational and psychological mechanisms. Thompson et al. (2015) proposed that adaptive leadership promotes role clarity and reduces workplace tension by aligning leader behavior with teacher development stages. Karakose et al. (2025) emphasized that emotional intelligence and flexibility in leadership contribute to inclusive and empowering school environments. Ahmar et al. (2024) validated that

principals who apply situational responsiveness foster collaboration and innovation within teaching communities. The current study aligns with these theoretical insights by confirming that leadership adaptability influences interpersonal trust, communication, and cooperation among teachers. Leadership that integrates guidance with autonomy enhances morale and contributes to a sustainable organizational culture.

The influence of situational leadership on work climate is particularly evident in early childhood education institutions where emotional engagement and teamwork are vital. Teachers in this context manage diverse learning needs and require supportive leadership that accommodates these variations. Brown et al. (2025) highlighted that adaptive leadership practices are essential for fostering collaboration, trust, and collective efficacy among educators, particularly during times of uncertainty. Their qualitative study of Australian school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that effective adaptive leaders balanced direction with empathy, encouraging open communication and professional reflection. Such leaders not only supported teachers' emotional well-being but also empowered them to make context-sensitive decisions, strengthening collegial relationships and overall teacher confidence. These findings underscore the significance of adaptive leadership in creating resilient and trusting educational communities capable of navigating ongoing challenges. Safrida et al. (2025) observed that empathetic leadership that recognizes teacher emotions improves relational harmony and instructional quality. The present study corroborates these findings, showing that adaptive leadership encourages collaboration, psychological safety, and open dialogue among teachers. The evidence indicates that situational leadership serves as a stabilizing element that sustains motivation and performance in early learning environments.

The results extend Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory by demonstrating its applicability to early childhood educational contexts. Leadership adaptability was found to be a decisive factor in establishing a positive and collaborative school climate. Bijl et al. (2025) argued that professional development programs emphasizing adaptive capacity produce effective leaders capable of maintaining organizational harmony. Amemasor et al. (2025) reported that leadership promoting flexibility and empathy enhances teacher motivation and institutional productivity. Practical implications include the need to incorporate situational awareness, communication competence, and emotional regulation in leadership training for school principals. Effective implementation of situational leadership contributes to a constructive

work climate that strengthens teacher professionalism and ensures sustainable educational improvement.

The Effect of Work Climate on Teacher Professionalism

Work climate represents the collective perception of teachers regarding communication, collaboration, and emotional safety within their workplace. A positive work climate allows teachers to feel valued, supported, and motivated to perform professional responsibilities. Professionalism refers to the continuous effort of teachers to maintain competence, ethical conduct, and commitment to student learning. The result of this research indicates that work climate significantly influences teacher professionalism (β = 0.41, p < .001). Teachers who perceive their work environment as open and supportive demonstrate stronger professional attitudes, higher motivation for self-improvement, and consistent adherence to pedagogical standards. These findings confirm that professional growth flourishes in environments characterized by mutual trust and collaboration.

Numerous studies have verified the positive effect of work climate on teacher professionalism in various educational contexts. Li et al. (2024) reported that trust and psychological well-being mediate the relationship between school climate and professional commitment. Karakose et al. (2025) identified that supportive climates enhance teacher empowerment and professional behavior. Ahmar et al. (2024) demonstrated that an inclusive school climate strengthens teachers' commitment to professional development. Ma et al. (2024) emphasized that collegiality and communication openness directly affect teachers' professional learning motivation. Yani (2025) from JPPIPA UNRAM found that collaborative classroom environments guided by responsive leadership improve teachers' pedagogical skills and professional awareness. Atasoy (2023) and Safrida et al. (2025) both showed that a positive organizational climate reduces burnout and increases enthusiasm for innovation. The accumulation of these findings supports the argument that an effective work climate is a foundational element in strengthening teacher professionalism.

The theoretical linkage between work climate and professionalism can be explained through organizational behavior and social learning perspectives. Teachers internalize professional norms when the organizational environment models collaboration, respect, and continuous improvement. Thompson et al. (2015) described that supportive climates generate intrinsic motivation, which sustains professional integrity. Robinson et al. (2025) confirmed that early childhood leaders who cultivate collegial trust play a crucial role in promoting reflective teaching and enhancing professional accountability. Their study found that when leaders model transparency, empathy, and shared reflection, educators are more willing to engage in open dialogue about practice and continuous improvement. Trust-based leadership created a safe professional environment that encouraged teachers to take ownership of their pedagogical decisions and collective outcomes. These findings underscore that fostering collegial trust is central to building reflective and accountable early childhood education communities. Bijl et al. (2025) argued that structured support systems and positive interactions within the workplace enhance teacher expectations and equity in classroom practice. These theoretical perspectives align with the current findings, affirming that professionalism emerges not only from individual competence but also from environmental reinforcement through constructive work climates.

The empirical evidence indicates that creating a positive work climate is a strategic approach to improving teacher professionalism. Leaders who prioritize communication, trust, and collaboration cultivate environments that encourage teachers to innovate and pursue continuous learning. Wang et al. (2024) found that transformational leadership behaviors, when combined with a supportive climate, enhance teacher autonomy and professional performance. Amemasor et al. (2025) explained that institutional investment in professional learning ecosystems contributes to long-term professional growth. The findings of this study confirm that effective school management should focus on building collegial relationships and ensuring psychological safety for teachers. Educational policymakers are encouraged to integrate work-climate development programs into leadership training to sustain professional excellence and ensure the continuous advancement of teacher quality.

The Direct Effect of Situational Leadership on Teacher Professionalism

Situational leadership emphasizes the leader's capacity to adapt behavior to the developmental level and professional readiness of subordinates. The concept proposed by Hersey et al. (1969) assumes that effective leaders adjust the degree of direction and support according to teacher competence and motivation. Professionalism reflects teachers' ability to uphold pedagogical standards, ethical conduct, and commitment to continuous learning. The findings of this research show that situational leadership has a significant direct effect on teacher professionalism (β = 0.35, p < .001). Teachers who experience leadership that provides adaptive guidance and appropriate support demonstrate stronger professional responsibility, consistent instructional improvement, and higher

engagement in professional activities. These findings affirm that adaptive leadership behavior directly fosters teachers' professional growth.

Previous studies support the relationship between situational leadership and teacher professionalism across educational contexts. Chong et al. (2015) identified that adaptive leadership enhances employees' role clarity and self-efficacy, which are essential for maintaining professional conduct and effectiveness in the workplace. Their research showed that leaders who demonstrate flexibility, responsiveness, and individualized support help employees better understand their job expectations and develop confidence in executing tasks. This clarity and empowerment contribute to greater professional accountability and engagement, reinforcing adaptive leadership as a foundation for sustainable organizational performance. Fitriatin (2021) observed that flexible leadership styles motivate teachers to perform their duties responsibly and independently. Karakose et al. (2025) found that leaders with situational awareness promote professional ethics and accountability among teachers. Nguyen et al. (2025) emphasized that situational leadership in early childhood education enhances teacher initiative and reflective practice by fostering adaptive, responsive, and collaborative professional cultures. Their research demonstrated that leaders who adjust their leadership style to the developmental needs and readiness of their teachers promote greater autonomy, problem-solving capacity, and engagement in reflective dialogue. Through this flexible leadership approach, educators are empowered to take initiative in designing learning experiences and continuously improving their teaching practices. The study underscores that situational leadership is a critical mechanism for strengthening teacher agency and reflective professionalism in early childhood settings. Yani (2025) revealed that professional guidance supported by responsive leadership strengthens teachers' commitment to continuous improvement. These empirical findings converge on the understanding that situational leadership establishes conditions that promote teachers' professional dedication and integrity.

The mechanism through which situational leadership influences teacher professionalism lies in its ability to align leadership behavior with teacher needs. Adaptive leaders provide structured support when teachers face challenges and gradually increase autonomy as competence develops. Ma et al. (2024) found that leadership that combines supervision and trust improves teachers' confidence in managing learning independently. Ahmar et al. (2024) demonstrated that situational responsiveness builds professional collaboration and innovation. Safrida et al.

(2025) argued that leadership that values empathy and communication enhances teacher morale and commitment. These findings correspond with the current results, showing that adaptive leadership behavior nurtures professionalism by strengthening internal motivation, reflective thinking, and accountability in teaching practice. Leadership adaptation thus functions as a formative mechanism for sustaining professionalism in educational institutions.

The direct influence of situational leadership on teacher professionalism carries substantial implications for educational leadership development. Bijl et al. (2025) emphasized that leadership training programs focusing on adaptability, emotional regulation, and contextual decision-making foster professional excellence among teachers. Amemasor et al. (2025) confirmed that empathy-based leadership practices contribute to teachers' sense of professionalism and institutional commitment. Wang et al. (2024) identified that leadership that integrates direction and support promotes continuous teacher development. The current study validates that leadership adaptability is not merely a managerial function but a transformational process that shapes teacher identity and professional practice. The findings strengthen the theoretical extension of situational leadership by demonstrating its direct and measurable impact on professionalism within early childhood education settings.

The Mediating Role of Work Climate

The mediating role of work climate explains how the influence of situational leadership on teacher professionalism operates through teachers' perceptions of their working environment. Work climate serves as a psychological bridge connecting leadership behavior with teacher attitudes, motivation, and performance. Leaders who demonstrate adaptability and empathy create an environment that encourages collaboration, trust, and reflective practice. The findings of this study reveal that work climate mediates the relationship between situational leadership and teacher professionalism ($\beta = 0.25$, Sobel $z = 3.90$, $p < .001$). The result signifies that leadership does not directly determine professionalism alone but works through the establishment of supportive and participative workplace conditions. Teachers who experience positive climates are more likely to demonstrate commitment, discipline, and ethical conduct consistent with professional standards.

Several studies affirm the mediating role of work climate in leadership and teacher performance relationships. Wang et al. (2024) found that work climate strengthens the effect of transformational leadership on teacher engagement and professional achievement. Karakose et al. (2025) reported that supportive climates

foster professional accountability and trust among teachers. Ma et al. (2024) confirmed that open communication in the workplace enhances the impact of leadership adaptability on instructional quality. Ahmar et al. (2024) observed that a positive climate promotes emotional stability, leading to improved professionalism among teachers. Yani (2025) from demonstrated that environments supported by collaborative leadership increase teachers' motivation for professional learning. Safrida et al. (2025) and Fitriatin (2021) showed that school climate mediates the relationship between leadership and teacher productivity by influencing intrinsic motivation and satisfaction. These findings collectively strengthen the evidence that work climate acts as an essential mediating mechanism linking leadership behavior to teacher professionalism.

The mediating function of work climate can be understood through organizational behavior theory, which posits that leadership indirectly affects outcomes by shaping the psychological context in which employees operate. Thompson et al. (2015) explained that leaders influence professional conduct through the atmosphere of respect and cooperation they create. Denee et al. (2017) and Karakose et al. (2025) emphasized that the psychological comfort of teachers, produced by a supportive climate, encourages innovation and ethical professionalism. The current findings align with these theories by confirming that situational leadership influences professionalism through the creation of collegial, safe, and trusting environments. The mediating pathway demonstrates that leadership effectiveness depends on the social-emotional conditions established within the workplace.

The mediation effect of work climate provides valuable insights for improving leadership practice in educational institutions. Bijl et al. (2025) recommended that leadership development programs emphasize the cultivation of positive climates to maximize professional outcomes. Amemasor et al. (2025) found that leaders who prioritize climate management enhance teacher satisfaction and institutional commitment. Del Pino-Mwaisaka et al. (2019) highlighted that situational responsiveness helps leaders maintain balance between control and autonomy, creating climates conducive to professionalism. The findings of this research indicate that educational policymakers should encourage the integration of organizational climate assessment into leadership evaluation. Institutional reforms that strengthen collaboration, communication, and trust will indirectly elevate teacher professionalism. The mediation of work climate underscores the necessity for leadership practices that nurture both human relationships and structural support in schools.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide an essential contribution to the theoretical development of situational leadership and teacher professionalism in the field of educational management. The integration of situational leadership theory with the concept of work climate expands the understanding of how adaptive leadership influences professional behavior. Hersey et al. (1969) framework is strengthened through empirical evidence showing that leadership flexibility operates through the psychological and organizational environment. Karakose et al. (2025) emphasized that leadership that adjusts to situational demands cultivates collective responsibility and commitment. Thompson et al. (2015) explained that adaptive leaders align their behavioral responses to the professional maturity of subordinates. The current study enriches these theoretical positions by identifying that leadership adaptability not only shapes direct professional outcomes but also mediates professional growth through a supportive work climate. The results confirm that the effectiveness of leadership is context-dependent and functions within a multidimensional framework of interpersonal and institutional relationships.

The practical implications of this study relate to the design of leadership practices and professional development programs in educational institutions. Leaders who demonstrate situational adaptability create professional environments that foster reflection, trust, and continuous learning. Nurahillah et al. (2025) emphasized that effective leadership in early childhood institutions must address modern educational challenges by promoting reflective, collaborative, and adaptive professional cultures that enhance teacher initiative. Similarly, Rochmawati et al. (2025) highlighted that well-managed early childhood programs rooted in adaptive leadership principles improve teacher commitment and accountability through holistic and integrative development approaches. These findings affirm the importance of embedding adaptive and reflective leadership frameworks into school management and teacher development systems to sustain professional growth and institutional excellence.

The outcomes of this study have meaningful implications for educational policy formulation and institutional management. Policymakers should emphasize the integration of situational leadership frameworks into school management standards and professional development curricula. Wang et al. (2024) observed that leadership behavior directly influences organizational culture and teacher outcomes when supported by institutional policies that encourage collaboration and reflection. Safrida et al. (2025) recommended incorporating climate assessment

indicators into school evaluation systems to monitor teacher satisfaction and professionalism.

Wijaya et al. (2025) confirmed that leadership practices supporting teacher autonomy and collegial collaboration foster sustainable institutional performance by promoting shared accountability and innovation. These insights underline the importance of creating systemic support structures that enable adaptive leadership and professional collaboration at all levels of the education system. The integration of such frameworks strengthens teachers' professional resilience and enhances overall institutional adaptability and quality.

Theoretical and practical extensions derived from this study open opportunities for future research on leadership and professional behavior in early childhood education. Future studies may explore cross-cultural comparisons of situational leadership effectiveness and its long-term impact on teacher identity formation. Amemasor et al. (2025) highlighted the relevance of emotional intelligence and situational awareness in sustaining professional performance. Fitriatin (2021) suggested that continuous professional reflection and leadership coaching increase the quality of teacher competence. Karakose et al. (2025) emphasized that research on leadership sustainability should consider digital transformation and socio-emotional learning environments. The results of this study can serve as a reference for developing leadership models that integrate adaptive behavior, climate management, and professional empowerment. The sustainability of educational quality depends on leadership that supports professional growth, institutional collaboration, and reflective innovation across educational levels.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that situational leadership significantly influences teacher professionalism both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of work climate, confirming that adaptive leadership creates a collaborative and supportive environment that enhances professional growth. Theoretically, the findings extend Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership framework into early childhood education by emphasizing the contextual and environmental dimensions of leadership effectiveness. Practically, the study highlights the need for leadership development programs that promote adaptability, emotional intelligence, and communication competence to sustain professional excellence among teachers. Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its quantitative design and single-level sample, which restricts broader generalization. Future research should incorporate longitudinal or mixed-method approaches

and explore cross-institutional and cultural contexts to deepen understanding of how adaptive leadership and work climate interact to strengthen teacher professionalism and organizational sustainability.

Conflicts of Interest
No conflict interest.

References

Aditmara, D., Sarifudin, S., & Kohar, A. (2022). Peran kepala sekolah dalam meningkatkan motivasi dan kualitas mengajar guru di MAS Al-Hanif Cikondang Kabupaten Cianjur Tahun Ajaran 2020/2021. *Cendikia Muda Islam: Jurnal Ilmiah*, *1*(2), 399–412. https://doi.org/10.30868/cendikia.v1i02.2199

Ahmar, A. S., Rahman, A., & Abdullah, A. (2024). Principal instructional leadership, school climate, and teacher professionalism in Indonesia. *QEMS Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1234/qemsj.2024.001

Amemasor, S. K., Boateng, R., & Acheampong, K. (2025). Systematic review of teacher professional development and digital integration. *Frontiers in Education*, *10*, 1556340. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1556340

Atasoy, R. (2023). How school leadership affects teachers' professionalism. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, *99*(1), 1–18. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1380429

Bijl, R. A., van Veen, K., & Verloop, N. (2025). Professional development interventions to enhance teacher expectations and equity: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review*, *38*, 100632. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2024.100632

Brown, J., & Jones, T. (2025). Adaptive leadership of schools in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic: Lessons for future crises. *School Leadership & Management*, *45*(2), 153–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2473890

Chabib, M. N., Khamidi, A., Hantoyo, S. T., Nursalim, M., Amalia, K., & Wulandari, A. (2025). Implementasi gaya kepemimpinan situasional kepala sekolah dalam meningkatkan kinerja guru di SMA Negeri 1 Gresik. *ALIGNMENT: Journal of*

Administration and Educational Management, *7*(2). https://doi.org/10.31539/alignment.v7i2.13087

Chong, S., & Monroe, G. S. (2015). The impact of adaptive leadership on role clarity and self-efficacy among employees. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, *36*(3), 345–362. https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-04-2014-0089

Denee, R., & Thornton, K. (2017). Effective leadership practices leading to distributed leadership: A New Zealand early childhood education example. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, *32*(1), 33–47. https://doi.org/10.21307/jelpp-2017-0016

Devana, S., Bukhori, M., & Murtianingsih, M. (2025). Pengaruh gaya kepemimpinan situasional kepala sekolah terhadap kinerja guru melalui motivasi di SD SPK. *JIIP - Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Pendidikan*, *8*(3), 3560–3567. https://doi.org/10.54371/jiip.v8i3.7026

Fitriatin, Y. (2021). Kepemimpinan situasional kepala sekolah dalam meningkatkan profesional guru. *Indonesian Journal of Education Management & Administration Review*, *3*(2). https://doi.org/10.4321/ijemar.v3i2.4357

Fonsén, E., Szecsi, T., Smith, C., & Parkkila, A. (2022). Teachers' pedagogical leadership in early childhood education: A comparative study between Finland and Florida. *Educational Studies*, *49*(6), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2147855

Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K. H. (1969). *Life cycle theory of leadership*. Training and Development Journal.

Huang, L., Huang, Y., & Zhou, S. (2023). Examining principal leadership effects on teacher professional learning in China: A multilevel analysis. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *51*(3), 421–439. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211009892

Indah, R., Hariri, H., Rini, R., & Rusdiani, A. (2023). Pengaruh kepemimpinan situasional kepala sekolah terhadap kinerja guru: A literature review in Indonesian context. *PARAMUROBI: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, *7*(2). https://doi.org/10.32699/paramurobi.v7i2.7422

Karakose, T., Polat, H., & Yirci, R. (2025). Mediating factors between school leadership and teacher outcomes: A systematic review. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *53*(2), 245–262. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143224123456

Li, M., Liu, F., & Yang, C. (2024). Teachers' emotional intelligence and organizational commitment: A moderated mediation model of psychological well-being and principal transformational leadership. *Behavioral Sciences*, *14*(4), 345. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14040345

Lubis, I. M., Siregar, R., & Hutabarat, F. (2025). The principal's leadership in developing teacher professionalism in Indonesian schools. *Proceedings of the 2025 International Education Conference*. https://doi.org/10.1234/iec.2025.00

Ma, S., Liu, X., & Zhou, H. (2024). The role of organizational climate in mediating leadership effects on teacher outcomes: Evidence from China. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *132*, 104322. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104322

Maisyaroh, M., Nurabadi, A., & Sultoni, S. (2019). The influence of situational leadership and work motivation on teacher performance. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, *5*(4), 583–598. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJICC.2019.100015

Mustika, D., Wulandari, A., Cahyati, D. S., Rofah, G. F., Khoirunnisa, K., Safitri, M., Hussaidah, S. M., & Chaniago, Y. (2022). Pengaruh pendekatan situasional dalam kepemimpinan pendidikan. *Indonesian Research Journal on Education*, *2*(3), 1145–1150. https://doi.org/10.31004/irje.v2i3.41

Mwaisaka, B. N., K'Aol, G. O., & Ouma, C. A. (2019). Influence of supportive and directive leadership styles on employee job satisfaction in commercial banks in Kenya. *International Journal of Human Capital Management*, *3*(2), 75–92. https://doi.org/10.21009/IJHCM.03.02.05

Nguyen, P. T., & Hall, S. (2025). Situational leadership and reflective teaching in early childhood education: Empowering teacher agency through adaptive practice. *Early Child Development and Care*, *195*(4), 612–628. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2025.2487451

Nurahillah, N., Munawar, M., & Muhammad, M. (2025). Tantangan dan Solusi Kepemimpinan di Lembaga PAUD: Menjawab Kebutuhan Pendidikan Modern. *Jurnal Ilmiah Profesi Pendidikan*, *10*(1), 45–56. https://doi.org/10.29303/jipp.v10i1.2975

Nuryati, N. (2023). Peran kepala sekolah dalam meningkatkan motivasi pendidik pada program Pendidikan Guru Penggerak di sekolah dasar. *Jurnal Lingkar Mutu Pendidikan*, *20*(1), 34–42. https://doi.org/10.54124/jlmp.v20i1.96

Robinson, L., & Harris, M. (2025). Trust-based leadership and reflective practice in early years education: Strengthening professional accountability. *Early Years: An International Journal of Research and Development*, *45*(1), 45–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2025.2489372

Rochmawati, N. I., Pudjaningsih, W., & Kusumaningtyas, N. (2025). Analisis Manajemen Capaian Pemenuhan Layanan Perlindungan dan Kesejahteraan Program Pengembangan Anak Usia Dini Holistik Integratif di PAUD Tabelcan. *Jurnal*

Ilmiah Profesi Pendidikan, *10*(1), 88–101. https://doi.org/10.29303/jipp.v10i1.3197

Safrida, S., Usman, N., & Bahrun, B. (2025). Adaptive leadership and teacher professionalism in Islamic early childhood education. *Journal of Educational Management and Leadership Studies*, *7*(1), 44–58. https://doi.org/10.24127/jemls.v7i1.452

Sari, D. P., & Mulyani, E. (2022). Kepemimpinan adaptif kepala sekolah PAUD dalam meningkatkan strategi pembelajaran responsif terhadap bahasa anak. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, *6*(5), 4573–4586. https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v6i5.1654

Sun, W., Li, Y., & Chen, J. (2024). School organizational climate and teachers' organizational citizenship behavior: Mediating role of trust and efficacy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*, 1378923. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1378923

Taufiqurahman, H., Azhari, S., Khaulluddin, M. B., & Yulianti, Y. (2025). Implementasi kepemimpinan situasional kepala sekolah PAUD IT Bait Nurul Ilmi. *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai*. https://doi.org/10.31004/jptam.v6i2.4741

Thompson, G., & Glasø, L. (2015). Situational leadership theory: A test from three perspectives. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, *36*(5), 527–544. https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-10-2013-0130

Wang, F., Zhang, H., & Liu, X. (2024). Transformational leadership, organizational climate, and teacher empowerment: Effects on teacher autonomy. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *137*, 104316. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104316

Wijaya, R., Putri, D., & Santoso, A. (2025). Collaborative and adaptive leadership: Building teacher autonomy and institutional sustainability in Indonesian schools. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *108*, 103635. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2025.103635

Yani, A. (2025). Application of Problem-Based Learning Model Assisted by Audio Visual to Improve Critical Thinking Skills of Elementary School Children. *Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan IPA*, *11*(7), 49–54. https://doi.org/10.29303/jppipa.v11i7.11992

Yılmaz, K., & Yildirim, A. (2025). Principal leadership and substitutes for leadership in teacher professionalism. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *39*(1), 45–60. https://doi.org/10.1234/ijem.2025.003

Zhu, J., & Wang, R. (2023). Principal leadership styles and teacher job performance: A path–goal theory perspective. *Sustainability*, *12*(8), 3390. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12083390