

Assertive Leadership Strategies of School Principals in Enhancing Teachers' Professional Competence in Banjarharjo Junior High Schools

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Abstract : Assertive leadership is regarded as a middle ground between authoritarian and permissive styles, yet its application in the management of junior secondary schools remains rarely examined empirically. This qualitative case study examines how headteachers apply assertive leadership to strengthen teachers' professional competence at SMP Negeri 4 Banjarharjo and SMP Bustanul Falah in Banjarharjo District, Brebes Regency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 22 informants, classroom observations, and document review, then analysed using an interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, supported by source and method triangulation. The findings show that assertive leadership operates through planning, organising, implementation, and supervision, through open communication, respect for teachers' opinions, prudent decision-making, follow-up training, and supervision with feedback. The two schools have different needs: strengthening instructional innovation and providing basic support for classroom management. Assertive leadership therefore bridges school improvement goals with respect for teachers' professionalism.

Keywords : Assertive Leadership; Teachers' Professional Competence; School Management; Junior High School; Educational Leadership

Abstrak : Kepemimpinan asertif dipandang sebagai jalan tengah antara gaya otoriter dan permisif, namun penerapannya dalam manajemen harian sekolah menengah pertama masih jarang dikaji secara empiris. Penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus ini mengkaji penerapan kepemimpinan asertif kepala sekolah dalam memperkuat kompetensi profesional guru di SMP Negeri 4 Banjarharjo dan SMP Bustanul Falah, Kecamatan Banjarharjo, Kabupaten Brebes. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam dengan 22 informan, observasi kelas, dan telaah dokumen, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif melalui kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan serta diperkuat dengan triangulasi sumber dan metode. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan asertif diterapkan melalui fungsi perencanaan, pengorganisasian, pelaksanaan, dan pengawasan, terutama melalui komunikasi terbuka, penghargaan terhadap pendapat guru, pengambilan keputusan yang bijaksana, tindak lanjut pelatihan, serta pengawasan disertai umpan balik. Kebutuhan kedua sekolah berbeda, yaitu penguatan inovasi pembelajaran dan pembinaan dasar pengelolaan kelas. Kepemimpinan asertif mampu

menjembatani peningkatan mutu sekolah dengan penghargaan terhadap profesionalitas guru.

Kata Kunci : Kepemimpinan Asertif; Kompetensi Profesional Guru; Manajemen Sekolah; Sekolah Menengah Pertama; Kepemimpinan Pendidikan

INTRODUCTION

The quality of teaching in a junior high school rarely rises above the quality of the leadership that surrounds it. A principal who only issues instructions tends to produce compliance without ownership, while a principal who avoids confronting weak practice tends to let mediocre teaching persist unchallenged. Between these two extremes lies assertive leadership: a style built on clear, honest, and respectful communication in which the leader states expectations directly, listens to disagreement without being threatened by it, and still holds the line on professional standards (Suripatty, 2021). Because assertive leadership sits precisely at the point where firmness meets respect, it is frequently proposed as a promising route for developing teachers' professional competence, yet the empirical record on how it actually unfolds inside a single school's planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling cycle remains thin, particularly in the Indonesian district context.

Recent studies continue to confirm that principal leadership is one of the strongest school level predictors of teachers' professional growth. He et al. (2024), working with secondary school teachers in Nigeria, found that instructional leadership significantly predicts teachers' professional development, while Zaeni and Wasliman (2025) showed that structured management practice not charisma alone is what turns professional development activities into lasting changes in teaching. Wang and Tian (2023) further demonstrated, in a large sample of Chinese teachers, that leadership approaches which distribute responsibility and cultivate teacher leadership raise both teachers' professional competence and their willingness to differentiate instruction. Complementing this line of work, Xu and Pang (2024) linked authentic and supportive leadership to teachers' well being and organisational commitment, and Ryan and Deci (2020) argued from self determination theory that competence, autonomy, and relatedness the very things an assertive leader protects through open dialogue are the psychological conditions under which sustained professional motivation is possible.

In Kecamatan Banjarharjo, Kabupaten Brebes, two junior high schools SMP Negeri 4 Banjarharjo and SMP Bustanul Falah illustrate this problem concretely. Preliminary performance data at both schools indicated that teachers had reasonably good access to professional development activities, yet the transfer of what was learned in training into everyday classroom practice remained uneven, and in one of the two schools even basic classroom management and collegial relationships still needed strengthening. This gap between participation in training and its application in the classroom is precisely the space in which a principal's leadership style matters most: a style that is too soft leaves the gap unaddressed, while a style that is too harsh risks damaging the working relationship needed to close it.

Based on this background, three research questions guided the study: (1) how do school principals in Banjarharjo apply assertive leadership strategies to improve teachers' professional competence; (2) which aspects of assertive leadership most influence the development of teachers' professional competence; and (3) which factors support and hinder principals' assertive leadership strategies in building a mutually supportive relationship between principals and teachers while improving the quality of learning. Correspondingly, the study aims to examine the application of assertive leadership strategies at the two schools, to identify the aspects of assertive leadership that shape teachers' professional growth, and to analyse the factors that support or constrain that process.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative case study design, appropriate for examining a leadership process in the natural setting where it occurs and for capturing the perspectives of multiple parties who experience that process differently (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was carried out at two

junior high schools in Kecamatan Banjarharjo, Kabupaten Brebes SMP Negeri 4 Banjarharjo and SMP Bustanul Falah chosen because both schools were undergoing an active effort to strengthen teachers' professional competence but differed in their baseline conditions, which allowed the two cases to be compared rather than merely described.

Informants were selected purposively to represent every party involved in or affected by the principal's leadership: principals, vice-principals, teachers, students, and parents. This combination allowed the principal's own account of the strategy to be checked against how it was actually experienced by the people receiving direction, guidance, evaluation, and communication from the principal. The composition of informants across the two schools is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Composition of Research Informants

No	Informant	Code	SMP Negeri 4 Banjarharjo	SMP Bustanul Falah	Total
1	Principal	WKS	1	1	2
2	Vice-principal	WK	3	3	6
3	Teacher	WGR	3	3	6
4	Student	WS	2	2	4
5	Parent	WM	2	2	4

Source: Field data (2026)

Data were collected through semi structured interviews, classroom observation, and document review covering school policies, supervision records, and prior training reports. Interview guides were organised around the four management functions of planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling so that each informant group described the same process from its own vantage point. Data were analysed using the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), and trustworthiness was strengthened through source and method triangulation, in which information from interviews was cross checked against observation notes and school documents before being treated as a finding

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Baseline Profile of Teachers' Professional Competence

Before the assertive leadership strategy was mapped, document review and initial observation were used to establish a baseline profile of teachers' professional competence at both schools. Table 2 summarises the baseline scores on a 1-4 scale across six dimensions that later informed each principal's planning.

Table 2. Baseline Profile of Teachers' Professional Competence Comparison between SMP Negeri 4 Banjarharjo and SMP Bustanul Falah

No	Dimension observed	SMPN 4 Banjarharjo	SMP Bustanul Falah	Interpretation
1	Classroom management	3	2	Classroom control and discipline needed further reinforcement, especially at SMP Bustanul Falah.
2	Teaching quality	3	2	Mastery of content and delivery required practical strengthening.
3	Learning innovation	3	3	Variation in methods and media had not yet developed optimally at either school.
4	Working relationships	3	2	Internal coordination and communication needed strengthening, particularly at SMP Bustanul Falah.

5	Technology skills	4	3	Use of technology had begun but was not yet consistent across subjects.
6	Assessment & evaluation	4	3	SMPN 4 was comparatively stronger; SMP Bustanul Falah needed reinforcement in evaluation practice.

Source: School documentation, processed by the researcher (2026)

The baseline data show that the two schools started from different positions. SMP Negeri 4 Banjarharjo already had a comparatively solid foundation in assessment and technology use, so its remaining challenge was mainly consistency turning training participation into varied, sustained classroom practice. SMP Bustanul Falah, by contrast, faced a more fundamental challenge in classroom management, teaching quality, and collegial relationships, which meant its leadership strategy had to begin with closer, more frequent coaching rather than with innovation alone. This empirical gap is what subsequently shaped each principal's choices at every stage of the management cycle, discussed in sections 3.1 to 3.4. Figure 1 visualises the contrast across the six baseline dimensions

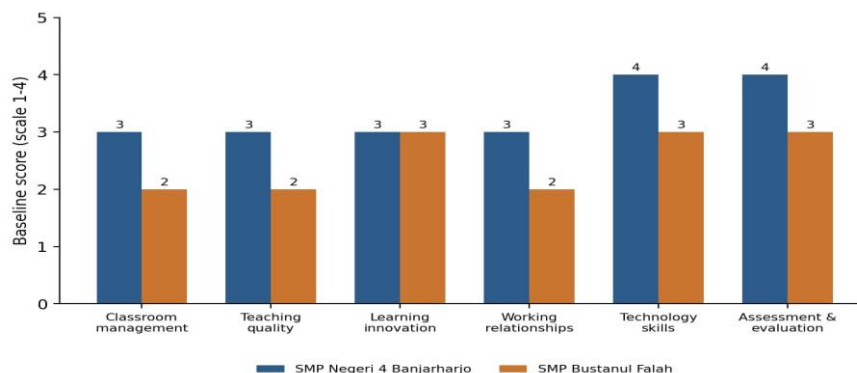


Figure 1. Comparative Baseline Scores of Teachers' Professional Competence
Source: Field data, processed by the researcher (2026)

Planning Strategy

Interview and document data show that both principals grounded their development programmes in performance data baseline scores, supervision results, and teacher input rather than in routine annual agendas. The empirical difference between the two schools lay in what that data based planning was directed toward. At SMP Negeri 4, where the baseline was already comparatively strong, planning was directed toward operational, measurable innovation targets: every teacher was required to produce a lesson plan reflecting prior training and to trial at least one technology based medium. At SMP Bustanul Falah, where classroom management and collegial relations were the weaker dimensions in Table 2, planning was instead directed toward scheduled supervision and mentoring by senior teachers to strengthen basic classroom practice.

The assertive character of this planning stage was not the use of data alone but the principal's willingness to explain openly, to teachers themselves, why a programme was chosen and what problem it was meant to solve a practice informants associated with a lower tendency to see the programme as an imposed burden. Table 3 summarises this evidence.

Table 3. Analytical Comparison of Planning Strategy between the Two Schools

Aspect	SMP Negeri 4 Banjarharjo (evidence)	SMP Bustanul Falah (evidence)	Interpretation
Basis of planning	Baseline performance data and supervision results	Baseline performance data and supervision results	Both schools moved away from routine,

Development priority	Operational, measurable innovation targets (lesson plans reflecting training, technology based media)	Scheduled supervision and mentoring by senior teachers	non evidence based annual agendas. Priorities matched each school's weakest baseline dimension (Table 2).
Form of assertiveness	Open explanation of why a target was set	Open explanation of why supervision was intensified	Explaining the rationale reduced teachers' perception of the programme as an imposed burden.

Source: Interview, observation, and document data, processed by the researcher (2026)

This pattern is consistent with Zaeni and Wasliman (2025), who found that structured management practice, rather than charisma alone, is what turns development activity into lasting change, the present finding adds that within a single leadership style, the object of that structure still has to be calibrated to a school's specific baseline.

Organizing Strategy

Both principals distributed responsibility rather than concentrating it in their own hands, assigning vice-principals, senior teachers, and subject teacher groups to specific coordinating roles. The empirical evidence again shows a difference in emphasis consistent with each school's baseline profile. At SMP Negeri 4, teachers already strong in technology or assessment (Table 2, dimensions 5-6) were positioned to mentor colleagues, extending an existing strength through peer coordination. At SMP Bustanul Falah, where working relationships scored lowest (Table 2, dimension 4), the priority was simply making each person's responsibility explicit who supervises lesson plans, who accompanies classroom management, who records follow up actions because unclear roles had previously contributed to weak coordination.

Table 4. Analytical Comparison of Organizing Strategy between the Two Schools

Aspect	SMP Negeri 4 Banjarharjo (evidence)	SMP Bustanul Falah (evidence)	Interpretation
Distribution of responsibility	Vice principals, senior teachers, and subject-teacher groups given coordinating roles	Same structure, applied to a school with previously unclear roles	Distributed responsibility is the shared organizing principle at both schools.
Basis for assigning roles	Existing strength in technology/assessment used to create peer mentors	Explicit assignment of who supervises, accompanies, and records	Role assignment targeted each school's specific coordination gap.
Outcome sought	Wider diffusion of existing pedagogical strength	Clearer accountability where coordination was previously weak	Consistent with the study's finding that organizing improves coordination and accountability.

Source: Interview and observation data, processed by the researcher (2026)

This distributed pattern of organizing is in line with Wang and Tian (2023), who found that leadership approaches distributing responsibility and cultivating teacher leadership raise both professional competence and teachers' willingness to differentiate instruction.

Actuating Strategy

In the actuating stage, assertive leadership was most visible in how direction was delivered. Informants reported that principals stated concretely what needed to improve and why, connected

teachers' effort to observable gains in student engagement, and combined firm correction with room for teachers to experiment without fear of being blamed for an honest mistake. Constructive reprimand, when necessary, was aimed at work behaviour and instructional standards rather than at the teacher personally a distinction informants associated with accepting correction without feeling demeaned.

Five recurring aspects of assertive leadership emerged as the mechanisms through which actuating was translated into teachers' classroom practice, ordered according to how frequently they were mentioned by informants. First, open communication that articulated learning targets and evaluation results in specific terms enabled teachers to prepare lesson plans, select appropriate methods, and design assessments aligned with those targets, whereas vague directions tended to produce inconsistent interpretations among teachers. Second, respect for teachers' opinions was evident when principals treated teachers as professionals with direct classroom experience rather than merely as implementers of instructions, encouraging stronger engagement in professional development programmes and greater ownership of improvement initiatives. Third, judicious decision making was reflected in principals' ability to balance firmness with fairness by requiring necessary corrections, such as revising lesson plans following supervision, while clearly explaining the rationale behind those decisions so that teachers did not perceive them as arbitrary. Fourth, structured involvement in professional development was more effective when principals required teachers to prepare application plans, implement new practices in the classroom, and share the results with colleagues, thereby narrowing the gap between training and practice. Fifth, involvement in improving students' competence demonstrated that teachers' professional growth was ultimately assessed not merely through administrative documents but through actual classroom practices and learning outcomes, with students and parents providing complementary evidence that enriched the evaluation of teachers' professional development.

Table 5. Aspects of Actuating Strategy and Their Effect on Teachers

Aspect of actuating	Empirical evidence	Effect on teachers
Open communication	Specific, explicit learning targets and evaluation results	Consistent lesson planning and assessment design across teachers
Respect for opinions	Teachers consulted as professionals, not merely instructed	Greater engagement and ownership of development programmes
Judicious decision-making	Firm correction paired with explained reasoning	Requirements experienced as fair rather than arbitrary
Structured PD involvement	Mandatory application plan, classroom trial, and sharing with colleagues	Training outcomes transferred into classroom practice
Involvement in student competence	Student engagement, clarity of explanation, willingness to ask questions used as evidence	Professional growth judged by classroom outcomes, not documents alone

Source: Interview and observation data, processed by the researcher (2026)

This finding is consistent with He et al. (2024), who found instructional leadership much of which operates through communication to be a significant predictor of teacher professional development. The balance between firm correction and explained reasoning also mirrors the tension Ryan and Deci (2020) describe between externally imposed control and support for autonomy. correction that still explains its reasoning preserves a teacher's sense of competence and autonomy rather than undermining it.

Controlling Strategy

In the controlling stage, both principals treated supervision as a continuous process of feedback and follow up rather than a one off inspection. Evidence was drawn from multiple sources academic supervision, lesson plan review, classroom observation, and student feedback so that judgments about a teacher's competence were not based on a single source of evidence. Table 6

links the four management functions, including controlling, to their empirical form, teacher focus, and expected outcome.

Table 6. Summary of Assertive Leadership Strategy by Management Function

Stage	Form of assertive strategy (evidence)	Focus for teachers	Expected outcome
Planning	Setting development priorities from performance data, supervision results, and teacher input	Understanding priorities and success indicators	A more directed and measurable development programme
Organizing	Distributing roles among vice principal, senior teachers, curriculum team, and subject teachers	Receiving support matched to needs and potential	Improved coordination and clearer accountability
Actuating	Giving direction, motivation, mentoring, and constructive correction	Applying development outcomes in the classroom	More varied, orderly, and student responsive teaching
Controlling	Conducting supervision, evaluation, honest feedback, and continuous follow up	Recognising personal strengths and weaknesses	Consistent improvement in professional competence

Source: Field data, processed by the researcher (2026)

Because controlling closed the loop back into the next planning cycle supervision findings became the data used in subsequent planning (section 3.1) the four functions did not operate as isolated stages but as a continuous cycle, a point developed further in section 3.7.

Supporting Factors

Four factors supported the assertive leadership strategy at both schools: an organisational structure that allowed responsibility to be shared rather than concentrated in the principal; the availability of baseline performance data, which kept feedback objective rather than personal, teachers' existing, if uneven, involvement in professional development activities; and a shared interest among principals, teachers, students, and parents in improving learning quality.

Table 7. Supporting Factors in the Implementation of Assertive Leadership

No	Supporting factor	Empirical evidence / effect
1	Shared organisational structure	Responsibility distributed among vice principals, senior teachers, and subject-teacher groups rather than held solely by the principal
2	Availability of baseline data	Table 2 baseline scores and supervision records kept feedback objective rather than personal
3	Existing engagement in PD	Teachers had prior, if uneven, participation in professional development activities to build on
4	Shared interest in quality	Principals, teachers, students, and parents converged on the goal of improving learning quality

Source: Interview, observation, and document data, processed by the researcher (2026)

Inhibiting Factors

Five inhibiting factors recurred across the two schools, comfort with conventional teaching habits, limited facilities for technology based learning, weak follow up mechanisms after training, a culture of assuming existing practice was already adequate, and at the school with weaker baseline scores, uneven internal communication. None of these inhibiting factors were treated by the principals as reasons to soften their standards, instead, each was met with a correspondingly practical adjustment.

Table 8. Inhibiting Factors and Corresponding Principal Adjustments

No	Inhibiting factor	Principal's practical adjustment (evidence)
1	Comfort with conventional teaching habits	Phased, rather than one off, innovation targets
2	Limited facilities for technology based learning	Low cost technology options introduced
3	Weak follow up mechanisms after training	Mandatory application reports required after training
4	Culture of assuming existing practice was adequate	Continued firm, evidence based feedback rather than relaxed expectations
5	Uneven internal communication (SMP Bustanul Falah)	Explicit role assignment and more frequent supervision (see 3.2)

Source: Interview, observation, and document data, processed by the researcher (2026)

Read together with sections 3.1-3.4, the supporting and inhibiting factors indicate that assertive leadership is not a single, uniform technique but a stance that adapts its emphasis to a school's starting point while keeping the same underlying commitment: state the problem clearly, hold the standard firmly, and still treat the teacher as a professional worth listening to. This is consistent with the broader shift in educational leadership research away from a single best leadership style and toward distributed, dialogic approaches to raising teacher competence (Wang & Tian, 2023; Wei, Alias, & Wahab, 2024), and with the emphasis Zaeni and Wasliman (2025) and, in the Indonesian context specifically, Hidayat, Khoiriyah, Saofanita, and Kusnadi (2025) place on balancing demand with a collegial tone.

Integrated Assertive Leadership Strategy

Synthesising sections 3.1 to 3.6, the findings can be organised into a single conceptual framework of how assertive leadership, carried through the four management functions, shapes teachers' professional competence at the two schools. The framework generated from the study's own findings rather than adopted from prior theoretical models is presented in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Integrated Assertive Leadership Strategy for Teachers' Professional Competence, Generated from Findings

Note. The model is generated from the synthesis of the study findings and is not adapted from any existing theoretical framework.

The framework has two properties visible in the data. First, it is cyclical rather than linear: controlling generates the feedback and follow up records that become the data used in the next planning cycle (section 3.1), so the four functions are best read as a continuous loop rather than a one off sequence. Second, the framework carries a single moderating condition that runs through every stage, namely the assertiveness of the principal open explanation in planning, explicit role clarity in organizing, firm but respectful direction in actuating, and honest, continuous feedback in controlling. Where this moderating condition was strong, as at SMP Negeri 4, the cycle mainly reinforced existing strengths, where the school's baseline was weaker, as at SMP Bustanul Falah, the same cycle was redirected toward closing more basic gaps in classroom management and

collegial relations. The novelty of this framework lies precisely in that moderating role: rather than proposing assertive leadership as a fixed technique, the two school comparison shows it functioning as an adaptive stance whose object changes with a school's starting point while its underlying commitment to clear, evidence based, respectful direction stays constant. This adaptive, evidence anchored characterisation has not been articulated in comparable detail in prior studies on assertive or instructional leadership in the Indonesian district context (cf. Suripatty, 2021; Santosa, 2022; Hidayat et al., 2025), and constitutes the study's principal contribution to the literature on principal leadership and teachers' professional competence.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes, first, that principals in Banjarharjo apply assertive leadership through all four management functions, translating it into data-based planning, role distribution in organizing, direct but supportive guidance in actuating, and honest, continuous feedback in controlling. Second, five aspects of assertive leadership most influence teachers' professional competence: open communication, respect for teachers' opinions, judicious decision making, structured involvement in professional development, and involvement in improving students' competence. Third, the strategy is supported by organisational structure, baseline performance data, teachers' existing engagement, and a shared interest in quality, while it is constrained by conventional teaching habits, limited facilities, weak post training follow up, complacency, and uneven internal communication constraints that principals addressed with practical, staged adjustments rather than by relaxing expectations. Fourth, comparing SMP Negeri 4 Banjarharjo and SMP Bustanul Falah shows that assertive leadership is best understood as an adaptive stance whose emphasis is set by a school's baseline profile rather than as a single fixed technique (section 3.7).

Based on these conclusions, principals are advised to institutionalise data based planning so that development priorities are visibly tied to evidence rather than routine, to make roles and follow up mechanisms explicit after every training activity, and to pair firm correction with a clear explanation of its purpose so that teachers experience it as professional guidance rather than personal criticism. Teachers are encouraged to treat professional development activities as a starting point rather than an endpoint by documenting and sharing how training outcomes are applied in the classroom. Future research would benefit from extending this two school comparison to a larger number of schools with more varied baseline conditions and from examining, quantitatively, the relationship between specific assertive leadership behaviours and measurable gains in teachers' classroom performance.

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