

## Driving School Autonomy: Catalyzing Change and Improvement of Teacher Performance in Eastern Indonesia

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**Abstract:** Indonesia's education reform through the driving school, *Sekolah Penggerak*, program promotes student-centered, collaborative learning. Teachers now guide rather than instruct, using varied resources in place of isolated methods. The program's nationwide rollout ensures access across regions. SDN 2 Telaga, located in Gorontalo, a province in eastern Indonesia, is one of the driving schools in this region, granted with autonomy, and serving as a catalyst for education transformation of surrounding schools. However, the autonomy granted to principals of driving schools to transform education by improving the teacher competencies in developing regions is rarely documented. This study aimed to examine how the school autonomy in teaching staff management enhances teacher competency development. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with teachers and administrators. The findings showed that autonomy granted from driving school program allowed school principals to improve teacher performance through four main strategies: (1) matching teacher roles with student needs to support more effective teaching, (2) building partnerships to develop students' overall skills, (3) applying clear accountability through rewards and consequences, and (4) evaluating teacher management through direct observation and supervision, in coordination with the local education office. These efforts help turn decentralization into real improvements in teaching quality and support the goals of national curriculum reform. These insights provide practical frameworks for policymakers aiming to implement school autonomy reforms, particularly in developing or rural regions.

**Keywords:** autonomy; driving school; teacher management, developing region, eastern Indonesia, SDN 2 Telaga

### 1. Introduction

Indonesia's education system is undergoing positive transformation, transitioning from centralized governance to decentralized autonomy, where schools play a direct role in policymaking, supported by government oversight. The decentralization of education, as part of regional autonomy, is vital for improving both human resource quality and educational outcomes (Melisah, 2022). It allows for curriculum and teaching method adaptation, as well as strengthening the role of local communities and stakeholders. By granting greater autonomy to schools, decentralization fosters community involvement in national education policies. This policy aims to create a more effective, responsive, and locally relevant education system, ultimately enhancing educational quality across Indonesia (Hanushek et al., 2013; Martinelli et al., 2022; OECD/Asian Development Bank, 2015).

School autonomy refers to the right of schools to manage their internal affairs based on the needs and aspirations of the school community, in line with applicable legal frameworks. This concept emerged to encourage schools to be more adaptive to local needs and more efficient in decision-making. With autonomy, schools gain the authority to design and implement curricula, manage budgets, and enhance the competence of educators according to student needs. However, granting autonomy presents significant challenges, particularly in ensuring consistent and equitable educational quality across regions. Schools must demonstrate strong managerial skills and creativity in resource utilization to achieve educational goals (Atiş & Dilbaz, 2022; Ramos et al., 2024).

Improving the quality of education is a central goal in national development and is closely tied to enhancing the overall quality of life for the Indonesian people. Education success depends on the synergy and effectiveness of key factors, including human resources, facilities, budget, and a robust evaluation system. Each of these elements

must be managed effectively to ensure that education in schools yields optimal results for students. Among these, the role of quality teacher is crucial. Competent teachers can adapt to curriculum changes, technological challenges, and diverse student needs with innovative approaches, playing a key role in shaping a generation ready to face future challenges. Teachers are expected to not only understand the material but also possess social sensitivity and a strong moral commitment to teaching with responsibility (Yaacob et al., 2025).

In a formal educational institution, various management and administrative functions are essential, with the management of teaching staff being one of the most critical. This is commonly referred to as teachers staffing management. Teachers staffing management involves a series of processes, starting from planning staffing needs, recruitment, and selecting competent candidates, to training and developing their competencies. Additionally, it includes periodic performance evaluations and recognition for outstanding staff, all aimed at enhancing the quality of education and improving the welfare of educators (Eze & Udeh, 2022; Kalsoom et al., 2017).

The key challenges in teaching staff management in Indonesia today extend beyond training institutions to include the recognition of teaching as a significant profession by the state. Educational personnel face challenges in competency standards, professionalism, and staying updated with developments in education and technology (Purwanto, 2021). Effective teaching staff management is crucial to ensure teachers not only meet administrative requirements but also possess qualifications aligned with current needs.

Over the past decade, various factors have hindered teacher competency development. Study by (Akbar, 2015) found that professional competence among teachers at MTs DDI Alliritengae Maros remains suboptimal due to inadequate qualifications, lack of awareness of their duties, insufficient infrastructure, low discipline, limited training, and minimal guidance. These challenges have resulted in stagnant student learning outcomes, highlighting the need for enhanced teacher professionalism. Similarly, (Wulandari, 2016) identified time constraints as a major obstacle in implementing school-based lesson study programs at SMP N 1 Sewon, despite the presence of supporting factors like adequate infrastructure, funding, and stakeholder commitment. In another study, (Sumarni, 2021) emphasized the effectiveness of teacher training programs in IT competence through organized management systems, which significantly improved educational quality in Cianjur. Meanwhile, (Juwarni, 2011) underlined the impact of subject-specialized teachers on improving both teacher competency and student outcomes, demonstrating how higher teacher qualifications lead to more effective teaching practices. Finally, (Ginting, 2018) highlighted strategic management's role in enhancing education quality, where improved infrastructure acted as a supporting factor. However, obstacles such as outdated teaching methods and unmotivated students hindered progress. Addressing these barriers through sustained support, effective management, and professional development can significantly advance teacher competencies and educational quality.

In recent years, efforts to improve learning quality through teacher staffing management have begun addressing such barriers, starting within schools themselves. Autonomy plays a key role, as granting it to schools helps enhance teaching quality (Dilecki, 2022). However, autonomy must be accompanied by competent school leaders (principal) and teachers to drive educational improvement, therefore, Indonesian government initiated the Driving School “*Sekolah Penggerak*” program, implemented simultaneously across Indonesia to ensure equitable school quality and welfare (Kemdikbud, 2021). School principals and teachers in these schools, selected through rigorous stages, act as change agents, with the program aiming to catalyze improvements, through strong and collaboration in mentorship and supervision with government, education expert and supervisor, as well as school broader communities (Ariyanti et al., 2019; Istiqomah et al., 2024). This program has proven as effective program in enhance transformation towards high quality education across Indonesia through improvement of principals and teachers’ competencies (Anam et al., 2023; Fauzi et al., 2024; Istiqomah et al., 2024; Maulana et al., 2024; Mustari, 2023).

One of the schools in eastern Indonesia, particularly Sulawesi Island, SDN 2 Telaga in Gorontalo Province, has been designated as a Driving School site. Along with thousands of other schools across Indonesia, it is implementing educational transformation. Gorontalo is a developing region with a human development index remains lower than more developed areas in western Indonesia such as Yogyakarta in Java, which known as “*Kota Pelajar*” (BPS-Statistics, 2024; BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2022). Transforming education in newly developing areas presents distinct challenges compared to more established regions. Therefore, examining the efforts of school

leaders granted autonomy in managerial roles in developing areas like Gorontalo is essential to understanding how education in smaller regions is advancing toward greater competitiveness. Therefore, this study aimed to describe the autonomy granted to SDN 2 Telaga in teaching staff management, highlighting its pivotal role in transforming the school from an ordinary institution into a provider of high-quality education. The findings aim to provide useful insights for policymakers and nearby schools to guide similar improvements in other developing areas.

## 2. Method

This study used a qualitative case study approach to examine school autonomy at SDN 2 Telaga. The research design was selected for its ability to capture the complex, context-bound nature of autonomy implementation in educational settings. Data were collected through multiple methods: semi-structured interviews with stakeholders including school administrators, teachers, and district education officers, observations, and analysis of institutional documents. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis and to ensure trustworthiness, the study employed methodological and source triangulation, as well as member checking with key informants, and maintained a comprehensive audit trail. All participants are provided with informed consent and data anonymized through pseudonyms.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Results

Based on the results of interviews, observations, and document studies, the findings related to the principal's autonomy in managing teaching staff, which catalyze change and inspire a significant improvement in educational quality, are described as follows.

#### a. Teacher Placement on Classes Based on Staffing and Students' Needs

Teacher placement was guided by an analysis of workload and staffing needs at the school. When a class required a teacher, the principal posted the vacancy on social media, but this approach was limited to hiring honorary teachers. For permanent staff, the principal had to submit a formal request to the education department, although sometimes the process was lengthy and complicated.

Teacher placement began with aligning their placement to the students' needs. After a few months, the principal evaluated the performance of teachers in their respective classes. If a mismatch between the teacher and the students became evident, the principal had to reassign the teacher to a different class. This approach prioritized student engagement, as a positive rapport between students and their teacher was essential for creating a comfortable and effective learning environment.

#### b. Teachers' Competency Development Through Active Communication and Learning Communities

Teachers at this school developed four key competencies: pedagogical, personal, social, and professional. To support this, the principal and teachers engaged in activities and learning through the *Merdeka Mengajar* Platform (PMM). Each teacher and the principal had their own PMM accounts, accessible anytime with a stable internet connection.

**Pedagogical Competence:** The principal, supported by an expert coach, guided teachers in enhancing their pedagogical competencies. Together, they focused on helping teachers master student characteristics, learning theories, curriculum development, instructional strategies, student engagement, communication, and assessment practices. The principal oversaw the overall process, including administration, teaching methods, and evaluations, ensuring steady progress in achieving these competencies.

**Personal Competence:** Personal growth was supported through weekly learning communities (*komunitas belajar*), where teachers discussed challenges in teaching. The principal provided feedback and solutions, fostering adherence to ethical norms, professional maturity, and a strong sense of responsibility and pride in their role as educators.

Social Competence: Social competence was developed through personal approach, discussions or sharing, between the principal and teachers, focusing on fostering inclusivity, objectivity, and non-discrimination while addressing challenges in interactions with students, colleagues, and the broader school community.

Professional Competence: Professional development was supported through training, workshops, and dissemination programs aimed at enhancing subject mastery and reflective practices. Teachers and the principal also engage in local Teacher Working Groups (KKG) and Subject Teacher Meetings (MGMP), with the principal actively ensuring they were informed and motivated to participate in these activities.

### c. Giving Rewards and Consequences for Teachers

The principal makes efforts to give rewards for teachers. One effort is by rewarding those who earn the most certificates on the *Merdeka Mengajar* Platform (PMM). The platform offers certificates to teachers and principals who participate in training, workshops, and other activities. The more activities they take part in, the more certificates they receive. The principal organizes annual evaluations to recognize outstanding teachers as well as asks students to choose their favorite teachers, with gifts or rewards given to motivate the teachers and encourage better performance for them and others.

One consequence that the principal could impose on a teacher who failed to align with the school's transformative vision or demonstrated insufficient commitment to its goals over time was a transfer (known as *mutasi*), following an evaluation of the teacher's performance. For transfers, whether to or from the school, the principal typically coordinated with the Gorontalo District Education Office, providing a performance report for teachers whose performance had declined or was unsatisfactory despite guidance and support. The Education Office would then call the teacher for a warning and further development. If no improvement was seen, the teacher would be transferred to another school. The principal would request a new teacher to be assigned in their place. This process supported the school's goal as a driving school, aiming to improve education holistically and ensure all educators became competent and acted as catalysts for change in other schools.

### d. Teacher Performance Evaluation

Teaching staff management in terms of performance evaluation was conducted in accordance with the Ministry of Education and Culture's regulations on educational assessment, which included workforce evaluation aspects. Teaching staff management evaluation in this school was carried out through direct observation and supervision by the principal and was coordinated with the local education office via the Teacher Performance Assessment (PKG) application. The evaluation process also served as a requirement for civil servants (PNS/ASN) to qualify for certification allowances. The PKG application used for the assessment adhered to the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 15 of 2018. Teacher competency evaluations focused on several aspects, including pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies.

Regarding the performance evaluation of administrative staff, the principal stated that since administrative personnel salaries from BOS (School Operational Assistance) funds only covered school operators, their evaluation was conducted through direct observation. Work standards were aligned with the monthly data entry schedule, which included school, teacher, and student data, and was directly coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Culture through applications like DAPODIK. Meanwhile, additional administrative responsibilities, such as vice-principal roles or specific assignments, were delegated to teachers deemed capable of handling them effectively. These additional responsibilities were evaluated directly and could contribute additional points in the PKG assessment.

The context diagram of the driving school's autonomy in managing human resources is described as follows.

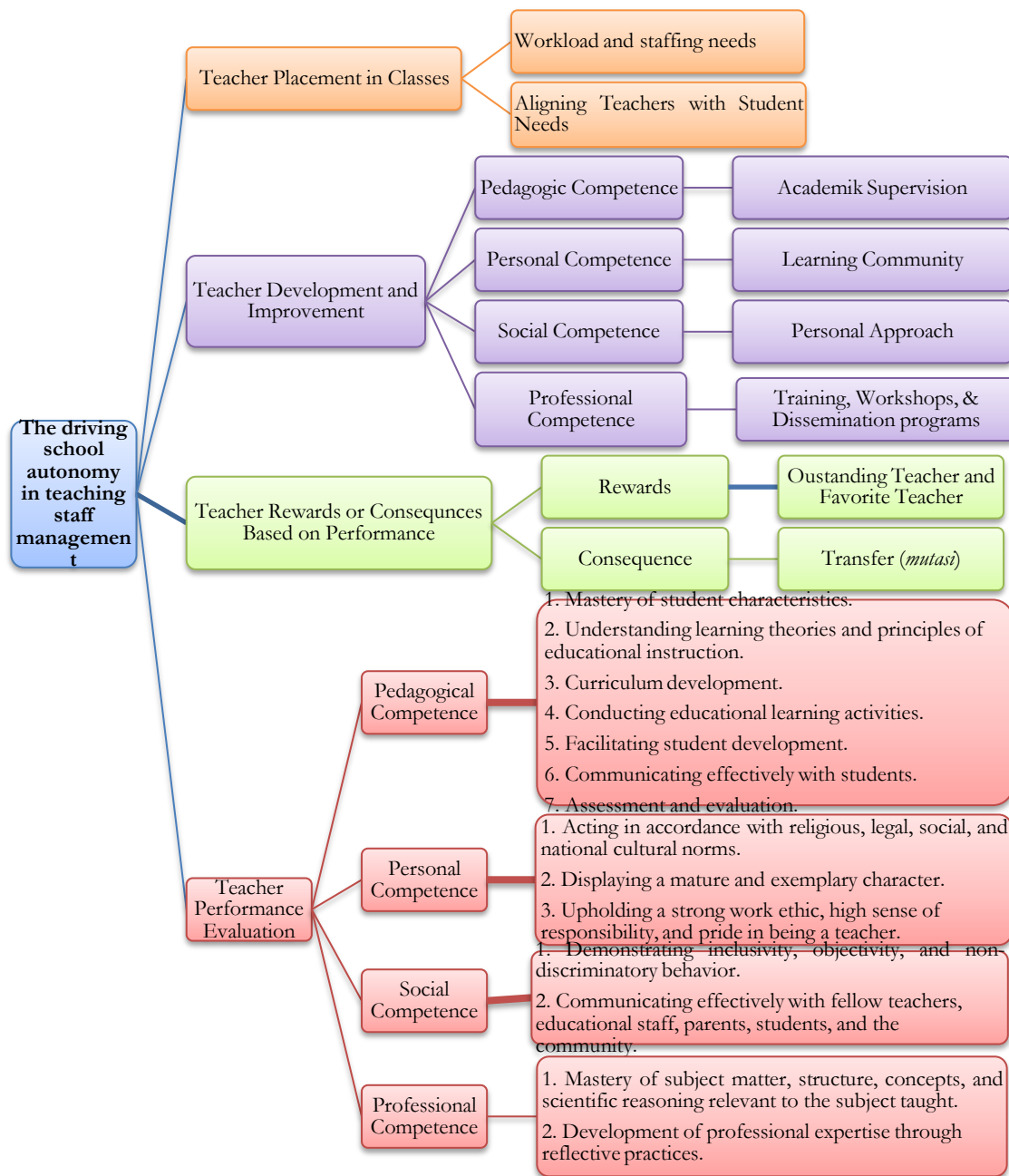


Figure 1. Context Diagram of the form of autonomy of the SDN 2 Telaga principal in teaching staff management

### 3.2 Discussion

The results of this current study revealed that the autonomy granted to schools played a crucial role in helping teachers enhance their competencies, addressing barriers that had hindered educational progress in previous years, which aligned with previous studies by (Akbar, 2015; Ginting, 2018; Juwarni, 2011; Sumarni, 2021; Wulandari, 2016). The principal autonomy in teaching staffing management at SDN 2 Telaga began with strategically placing teachers based on student needs, fostering strong teacher-student relationships, and ensuring a positive learning environment. Teachers acted as facilitators, not dictators. Ensuring strong teacher-student engagement was a key element in teacher management, as it promoted both student development and teacher competence, fostering a smooth learning process (Akbar, 2015; Chen & Liu, 2022; Dewi et al., 2017; Ubaedila et al., 2023; Wulandari, 2016). The teacher's educational background and ability to deliver material in a way that was easily understood by



students enhanced student comprehension of the lessons. The principal's strategy for improving teacher competence, particularly in personality development, was also equally crucial for students, because teachers served as role models for students, demonstrating responsibility, leadership, noble values, effective communication, and fostering strong relationships within the school community.

Competency development in pedagogy, personal, social, and professional areas was pursued through collaboration with expert trainers, local education offices, and district-level teacher communities, alongside the *Merdeka Belajar* digital platform connecting teachers across Indonesia, which contributed to teachers' competency improvement (Ariyanti et al., 2019; Wulandari, 2016). Teacher performance was regularly evaluated, with feedback shared with local authorities, and efforts made to reward high-performing teachers or address low commitment. This autonomy enables SDN 2 Telaga to serve as a catalyst for improving educational quality in Gorontalo and surrounding areas.

The principal, as a manager, not only a leader, plays a crucial role in improving education quality through teaching staff management, where autonomy contributes to the principal's success in enhancing quality of teachers, which aligned with the previous findings (Anam et al., 2023; Fauzi et al., 2024; Istiqomah et al., 2024; Maulana et al., 2024; Mustari, 2023).

The principal efforts to foster and develop teacher competencies at SDN 2 Telaga were aligned with the vision and procedures of the *Sekolah Penggerak* program, focusing on four key aspects: pedagogical, personality, social, and professional competencies. These efforts were implemented through various strategies, including teacher supervision during the learning process, optimizing the learning community as a forum for sharing and discussing challenges, and encouraging active participation in training, workshops, and socializations organized by KKG and MGMP at the Telaga sub-district level. This is important because teachers and educational staff are key human resources in shaping the nation's character through the development of personality and academic values in graduates, and synergistic collaboration between the principal, supervisor, teachers, students, parents, administrative staff, and government is essential in supporting education process and contribute to quality improvement (Nurchaya et al., 2024; Wulandari, 2016).

The research by (Handayani & Purnami, 2021) shows that techniques such as class visits, individual meetings with both new and experienced teachers, self-assessment, seminars, KKG, and technology guidance in schools play a significant role in improving education quality. Through these competency development and coaching efforts, teachers can adapt to changes and meet the demands of scientific and technological advancements. These efforts also assist teachers in addressing practical issues, such as preparing class administration and developing teaching models, expanding their knowledge, solving problems related to daily tasks, reinforcing discipline among teachers, students, and school staff, and encouraging motivation through rewards. Additionally, the implementation of consequences ensures accountability and commitment to change (Solikhulhadi, 2021).

The role of rewards and consequences in improving teacher performance by the school principal aligned with the study results previous research (Eze & Udeh, 2022; Hutagaol et al., 2022; Kalsoom et al., 2017; Saad, 2017) where positive reinforcement through rewards has been shown to enhance teacher motivation and competencies, with studies indicating that teachers who feel valued for their contributions are more likely to perform at higher levels. Conversely, consequences for underperformance, such as reprimands or salary adjustments, are necessary to maintain discipline and accountability. Without these measures, teachers may become complacent, undermining their professional development. A balanced system that incorporates both rewards for achievements and consequences for shortcomings is crucial in fostering an environment that promotes continuous improvement and better educational outcome.

At SDN 2 Telaga, teacher evaluations conducted by the principal aimed to assess the teachers' mastery in key areas such as student characteristics, learning theory, curriculum development, teaching activities, student potential development, communication, and assessment of learning outcomes. Evaluations were also conducted on the teachers' behavior based on the values of Pancasila, including adherence to legal, religious, and social norms, serving as role models, work ethic, non-discrimination, and effective communication. Effective teacher management and evaluation has a positive impact on teacher performance and the quality of education. The principal's leadership, through autonomy in coordinating resources, fosters a conducive learning environment and

improves school management. The transformation of *Sekolah Penggerak* does not require instant change but rather gradual progress, taking a minimum of three years to transition from an ordinary school to a high-quality institution. This process aligns with Indonesia's educational vision, shifting the role of teachers from being the sole source of knowledge to facilitators of various learning resources, from isolated efforts to a collaborative approach, involving the central government, experts, local communities, and the broader educational ecosystem, all working together towards a vision that fosters national sovereignty, independence, and strong character. (Depdiknas, 2000; Kemdikbud, 2021).

This study has limitations as it focuses solely on examining the form of autonomy granted to principals in managing teachers to support their competency development, without extending to evaluating whether the the autonomy promoted through the *Sekolah Penggerak* program at SDN 2 Telaga has significantly increased teacher competencies or improved the quality of education at the school. Further research is needed to measure the effectiveness of the autonomy in improving teacher competencies.

## Conclusion

Study on the autonomy of teaching staffing management and the role of teachers in improving the quality of education has been conducted to explore how the policy of principal autonomy can impact the school transformation towards high quality education. Based on the findings, the autonomy granted to school principal at SDN 2 Telaga plays an important role in improving teacher competencies. The principal's autonomy in teaching staff management begins with strategically placing teachers in classrooms based on student needs and fostering strong teacher-student relationships to create a positive learning environment, where teachers act as facilitators rather than dictators. The development of teacher competencies encompasses pedagogical, personal, social, and professional domains, conducted in collaboration with expert trainers, local education offices, and community-based teacher groups at the district level, as well as through the *Merdeka Belajar* digital platform, which connects teachers across Indonesia. Teacher performance is regularly evaluated and communicated with local authorities, alongside efforts to reward outstanding teachers and implement consequences for those with poor commitment. Through this autonomy, SDN 2 Telaga is playing a key role in improving teachers' performance which leads to the improvement of educational quality of the school.

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