

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN MALUKU'S DISADVANTAGED, FRONTIER, AND OUTERMOST SCHOOLS: A BURU MULTI-SITE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Effective principal leadership is critical for maintaining school quality in Indonesia's disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost (3T) regions, which face severe resource and geographical constraints. This study examines the implementation and contextual dynamics of transformational leadership in two junior high schools in Buru, Maluku. Using a qualitative multi-site design, data were gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that principals adapt the core dimensions of transformational leadership to overcome local limitations, notably by leveraging local resources for intellectual stimulation and providing intensive emotional and instructional coaching. These adaptive practices significantly enhance teacher motivation, instructional creativity, student confidence, and community engagement. Theoretically, this study advances educational management by conceptualizing transformational leadership in 3T contexts not as a rigid, universal framework, but as a contextualized, resource-oriented practice. Practically, it implies that school management in marginalized areas must shift from standardized administrative models to adaptive, community-embedded leadership strategies to sustain educational quality.

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INTRODUCTION

The novelty of this study lies in three key aspects that distinguish it from previous research. First, unlike most studies on transformational school leadership that are conducted in well-resourced urban or semi-urban schools, this study is situated in the extreme context of Indonesia's 3T areas, where geographical isolation, infrastructure limitations, and socio-cultural dynamics create fundamentally different leadership challenges. Second, rather than examining a single school, this study employs a comparative multi-site design across two schools with similar geographical constraints but distinct leadership cultures, allowing for a deeper understanding of how contextual factors shape leadership practices.

Third, this study goes beyond verifying whether transformational leadership exists in 3T schools; it critically examines how the four dimensions of transformational leadership—idealized influence, inspirational motivation,

intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—are adapted, reinterpreted, and operationalized under conditions of severe resource scarcity and community-based school ecosystems. By doing so, this study challenges the universal applicability of Western-derived leadership models and contributes to the development of a contextually grounded theory of transformational leadership in marginalized educational settings.

Education is a central instrument for developing human resources and reducing regional inequality. In Indonesia, however, equitable access to quality education remains a major challenge in disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost areas, commonly known as 3T areas. Schools in these locations often face limited infrastructure, unstable transportation, weak information technology access, insufficient learning facilities, and limited teacher professional development opportunities (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2021; Kementerian Desa, Pembangunan Daerah Tertinggal, dan Transmigrasi Republik Indonesia [Kemendes PDTT], 2020). These conditions create a persistent gap between schools in urban centers and schools located in remote islands, coastal areas, or mountainous regions.

Within such a context, the principal becomes a key actor in maintaining the continuity and quality of education. Principal leadership is not limited to administrative control; it includes the ability to inspire teachers and students, mobilize limited resources, create a positive learning climate, and build community trust. Bush (2020) emphasizes that educational leadership is closely related to school effectiveness because leaders shape organizational direction, teacher commitment, and learning culture. For schools in 3T regions, this role is even more strategic because principals must transform limitations into opportunities for collaboration, innovation, and resilience.

Transformational leadership offers a relevant framework for understanding how principals lead schools in challenging environments. Burns (1978) introduced transformational leadership as a process through which leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Bass (1985) later developed the model into four main dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Bass and Riggio (2018) explain that transformational leaders build trust through moral example, communicate a compelling vision, stimulate creativity, and pay attention to individual needs. In schools, these dimensions can strengthen teacher motivation, student confidence, learning innovation, and collective commitment (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Northouse, 2022).

SMP Negeri 28 Buru and SMP Negeri 37 Buru are public junior high schools located in Fena Leisela District, Buru Regency, Maluku Province. Both schools represent the educational realities of 3T areas. SMP Negeri 28 Buru is located in Waemite Village, about 200 km from the district government center, while SMP Negeri 37 Buru is located in Waegrahe Village, about 180 km from the center. Access to both schools is affected by unpaved roads, mountainous terrain, limited transportation, unstable electricity, and weak internet connectivity. Students often walk long distances to school, and in the case of SMP Negeri 37 Buru some students cross Lake Rana by boat. Despite these limitations, both schools show participation in academic and non-academic competitions, indicating that school leadership may contribute to motivation and institutional resilience.

Previous studies have shown that transformational leadership can improve teacher motivation, organizational commitment, and student achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Podsakoff et al., 1990; Robinson et al., 2008). However, most studies on transformational school leadership are conducted in relatively accessible school contexts with better infrastructure and more stable organizational support. Empirical studies that specifically examine transformational leadership in Indonesia's 3T schools remain limited, especially studies that compare more than one school site with similar geographical constraints but different leadership cultures.

The novelty of this study lies in its multi-site analysis of transformational leadership in two 3T schools in Buru Regency. This study does not only describe whether principals apply transformational leadership, but also explains how the four dimensions are translated into concrete practices under limited facilities, geographical isolation, and community-based school culture. Therefore, this study provides a contextual contribution to educational management by showing that transformational leadership in 3T schools is adaptive, relational, and strongly influenced by socio-geographical conditions.

The objectives of this study are to describe the implementation of the four dimensions of transformational leadership by principals at SMP Negeri 28 Buru and SMP Negeri 37 Buru; analyze the impact of these practices on school performance, teacher motivation, learning quality, student confidence, and community participation; and identify the factors that support and hinder transformational leadership in 3T schools.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach with a multi-site study design. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to understand leadership practices, school culture, teacher experiences, student motivation, and community involvement in their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The multi-site design allowed the researcher to compare leadership patterns between SMP Negeri 28 Buru and SMP Negeri 37 Buru and to identify both shared and site-specific findings (Yin, 2018).

The research sites were selected purposively because both schools are located in 3T contexts and face similar structural limitations. SMP Negeri 28 Buru is located in Waemite Village, Fena Leisela District, and serves 24 students. Its school resources include three classrooms, one teachers' room, a principal's room, a simple library integrated into the teachers' room, and limited learning facilities. SMP Negeri 37 Buru is located in Waegrahe Village, Fena Leisela District, and serves 65 students across grades VII, VIII, and IX. It also has three classrooms and similarly limited facilities. Both schools lack adequate laboratories, stable electricity, internet access, and sufficient sanitation facilities.

Research participants consisted of principals, teachers, and students who were selected through purposive sampling. The participants included two principals, selected teachers from both schools, and students who were involved in academic and non-academic school activities. Principals were selected as key informants because they directly implemented leadership practices. Teachers were selected because they experienced principal leadership in instructional and organizational activities. Students were selected because they experienced the effects of leadership practices through motivation, discipline, and participation in school programs.

Data were collected through three techniques. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, and students. The interview questions focused on principal role modeling, motivation strategies, teacher creativity, personal support, school challenges, and community participation. Second, direct observation was conducted on school routines, teacher interaction, student activities, learning conditions, and school environment. Third, documentation was used to examine school profiles, school programs, student achievement records, meeting notes, and photographs of school activities.

The interview process was conducted using flexible guiding questions so that informants could explain their experiences in depth. Examples of interview questions included: "How does the principal motivate teachers and students in difficult school conditions?", "What forms of support are provided by the principal to teachers?", "How do teachers develop learning strategies with limited facilities?", and "What obstacles most affect school leadership in this area?" Observation focused on the principal's presence in school activities, teacher discipline, interaction between teachers and students, use of learning resources, and community involvement.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), consisting of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. In the first stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were reduced by identifying information related to the four dimensions of transformational leadership. In the second stage, the data were displayed in thematic categories, including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, leadership impact, supporting factors, and inhibiting factors. In the third stage, conclusions were drawn by comparing evidence from interviews, observations, and documents.

Cross-site comparison was conducted by comparing leadership practices at SMP Negeri 28 Buru and SMP Negeri 37 Buru. The comparison focused on similarities, differences, and contextual meanings of leadership practices in both schools. Data credibility was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing information from

principals, teachers, and students; method triangulation by comparing interviews, observations, and documents; and member checking by confirming interpretations with participants.

Research Design and Sites

This research employed a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design. A qualitative approach was selected to understand leadership practices, school culture, teacher experiences, student motivation, and community involvement in their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The multi-site design allowed for a comparative analysis of leadership patterns between SMP Negeri 28 Buru and SMP Negeri 37 Buru, identifying both shared and site-specific findings (Yin, 2018).

The research sites were selected purposively based on specific criteria: both schools are located in remote, underdeveloped, and disadvantaged (3T) contexts, face similar structural limitations, and are situated within the same district (Fena Leisela). SMP Negeri 28 Buru (Waemite Village, ~200 km from the district center) serves 24 students, while SMP Negeri 37 Buru (Waegrahe Village, ~180 km from the district center) serves 65 students. Both schools share severe infrastructure limitations, including a lack of adequate laboratories, stable electricity, internet access, and sufficient sanitation (see Table 1).

Participants and Sampling

Research participants consisted of 25 individuals selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The specific breakdown included two principals, nine teachers, and 14 students. The basis for informant selection was determined by specific criteria: (1) Principals were selected as key informants because they are the primary implementers of leadership practices; (2) Teachers were selected based on a minimum of two years of teaching experience at the respective schools and their active involvement in curriculum and extracurricular activities; (3) Students were selected based on their active participation in school programs (e.g., Student Council/OSIS) or their representation of diverse motivation levels to provide a comprehensive perspective.

Data Collection Data were collected through three techniques over a four-week period at each site. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with all 25 participants. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian or the local Buru language, depending on the informant's preference, to ensure expressive depth. Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide focused on the four dimensions of transformational leadership. Examples of operational questions included: "Can you describe a specific instance where the principal motivated you during a facility shortage?" and "How does the principal provide personal support when teachers face instructional challenges?" Second, non-participant direct observation was conducted for approximately 60 hours per site (totaling 120 hours). Observation focused on specific behavioral indicators: the principal's physical presence during morning routines, teacher-student interactions in the classroom, the utilization of limited learning resources, and community engagement during school events. An observation checklist aligned with the leadership dimensions was used to guide field notes. Third, documentation was gathered to triangulate field data, including school profiles, annual work plans (RKAS), meeting minutes, student achievement records, and photographic evidence of school activities.

Data Analysis and Coding Process

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), but was operationalized through a systematic coding process. First, open coding was applied to the interview transcripts and field notes to label meaningful units of text with initial descriptive codes (e.g., "principal arriving early," "teachers sharing limited books"). Second, axial coding was conducted to group these initial codes into broader sub-categories (e.g., "modeling discipline," "resource sharing"). Finally, selective coding was used to map these sub-categories against the theoretical framework of transformational leadership (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration). This coding process was done manually using color-coding matrices to ensure the researcher remained deeply immersed in the data, though the logic was systematically documented in a codebook.

Cross-Site Comparison

To ensure a rigorous multi-site analysis, a cross-case synthesis was conducted following Yin's (2018) replication logic. First, a within-case analysis was completed for each school to construct a detailed narrative of its specific leadership context. Second, a literal replication logic was applied to identify shared patterns and common practices across both schools. Third, a theoretical replication logic was used to explore contrasting findings and understand how contextual differences (e.g., student population size) predicted different leadership approaches. Operationally, the researcher constructed a comparative matrix that mapped the coded leadership themes against contextual variables (infrastructure, teacher-student ratio) to systematically compare and contrast the two sites.

Trustworthiness

Data credibility was ensured through triangulation. Source triangulation compared narratives from principals, teachers, and students. Method triangulation cross-verified interview claims with observational field notes and documentary evidence. Furthermore, member checking was conducted by returning the preliminary thematic summaries to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Transferability was supported by providing a "thick description" of the 3T school context, while dependability and confirmability were maintained through an audit trail of the coding process and field notes.

Table 1. Research sites and school characteristics

Aspect	SMP Negeri 28 Buru	SMP Negeri 37 Buru	Interpretive note
Location	Waemite Village, Fena Leisela District, about 200 km from the district government center.	Waegrahe Village, Fena Leisela District, about 180 km from the district government center.	Both schools represent remote 3T educational contexts.
Students	24 students, mostly from farming families.	65 students in grades VII, VIII, and IX, mostly from farming families.	Student motivation remains visible despite socioeconomic limitations.
Teachers and staff	Principal, 4 civil servant teachers, 4 PPPK teachers, 8 honorary teachers, and 1 operator.	Principal, 4 civil servant teachers, 7 PPPK teachers, 4 honorary teachers, and 1 operator.	Teacher dedication is a central resource for leadership implementation.
Facilities	Three classrooms, teachers' room, principal's room, simple library, limited technology, unstable electricity and internet, and no adequate sanitation.	Three classrooms, teachers' room, principal's room, simple library, limited technology, unstable electricity and internet, and no adequate sanitation.	Infrastructure limitations require adaptive and creative leadership.

Source: Field documentation and school profile data, 2026.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION ^[wB1]

Transformational leadership practices across the two sites

The findings show that the principals of SMP Negeri 28 Buru and SMP Negeri 37 Buru implemented the four dimensions of transformational leadership, although with different emphases. At SMP Negeri 28 Buru, the leadership pattern was more humanistic, participatory, and familial. The principal built emotional closeness with teachers, encouraged informal communication, and strengthened a sense of shared responsibility. At SMP Negeri 37 Buru, the leadership pattern was more firm, structured, and discipline-oriented. The principal emphasized order, direct supervision, and organizational control. Despite these differences, both schools experienced positive changes in teacher discipline, school climate, student motivation, and community participation.

Idealized influence was reflected in the principals' discipline, responsibility, integrity, and direct involvement in school activities. The principal of SMP Negeri 28 Buru demonstrated this dimension by being present in school activities, encouraging teachers through personal support, involving teachers in school decisions, and maintaining

transparency in school programs. In SMP Negeri 37 Buru, idealized influence was more visible in firm discipline, direct monitoring, and the organization of school routines. Teachers viewed the principals' presence and consistency as moral examples that encouraged them to maintain responsibility even in difficult geographical conditions.

Inspirational motivation appeared in the principals' ability to build optimism among teachers and students. Both principals repeatedly communicated the belief that living in a remote area should not prevent students from learning, competing, and achieving. Motivation was delivered through flag ceremonies, teacher meetings, informal conversations, and recognition of student achievements. In SMP Negeri 28 Buru, motivational strategies emphasized moral support, persuasion, and family-like togetherness. In SMP Negeri 37 Buru, motivation was linked to clear targets, work discipline, and supervision.

Intellectual stimulation was found in efforts to encourage teachers to develop creative learning strategies despite limited resources. Teachers were encouraged to use simple materials from the surrounding environment as learning media, adapt teaching methods to student conditions, and discuss problems in classroom practice. In both schools, the absence of stable electricity and internet access did not prevent teachers from using local resources, natural materials, and community knowledge as learning media. This shows that innovation in 3T schools does not always refer to digital learning, but also to practical creativity based on available resources.

Individualized consideration was expressed through personal guidance, emotional support, mentoring, and attention to the different needs of teachers and students. Teachers in both schools faced challenges related to distance, limited training opportunities, administrative burden, and living away from their families while serving in remote areas. The principals responded through direct communication, personal encouragement, and problem solving. Students were also supported according to their potential, especially those involved in competitions or school activities.

Table 2. Cross-site synthesis of transformational leadership dimensions

Dimension	SMP Negeri 28 Buru	SMP Negeri 37 Buru	Cross-site meaning
Idealized influence	Humanistic, participatory, transparent, and familial leadership; the principal becomes a moral and professional role model.	Firm, disciplined, structured, and directly involved leadership; the principal becomes a symbol of order and responsibility.	Role modeling builds trust, discipline, and commitment in schools facing difficult access and limited facilities.
Inspirational motivation	Motivation through persuasion, emotional support, appreciation, and shared ownership of school progress.	Motivation through target setting, firm supervision, routines, and discipline culture.	Both approaches build optimism and strengthen teacher and student resilience in 3T contexts.
Intellectual stimulation	Teachers are encouraged to discuss, collaborate, and use simple learning media from the environment.	Teachers are encouraged to innovate under direct monitoring and organizational guidance.	Learning innovation emerges from local adaptation rather than technology-based resources.
Individualized consideration	Personal communication, informal support, and family-like attention to teachers and students.	Direct coaching, personal supervision, and structured problem solving.	Personal attention helps sustain motivation, loyalty, and student confidence.

Source: Research findings based on interviews, observations, and documentation, 2026.

Impact of transformational leadership on school performance

The first impact of transformational leadership was the improvement of teacher discipline and responsibility. Teachers became more consistent in attending school activities, preparing learning activities, and cooperating with colleagues. The principals' direct involvement and exemplary behavior created a moral pressure for teachers to show

similar responsibility. This impact was visible in teacher attendance, participation in meetings, and willingness to support school programs despite limited facilities.

The second impact was the strengthening of teacher motivation and collaborative work culture. In SMP Negeri 28 Buru, teachers felt supported because the principal used a warm and family-like approach. In SMP Negeri 37 Buru, teachers became more organized because the principal established clearer routines and direct supervision. The two patterns differed in style but produced similar outcomes: stronger teacher engagement, greater willingness to cooperate, and better school order.

The third impact was the development of learning creativity. Because both schools experienced limited infrastructure, teachers were encouraged to use available resources, including the natural environment, simple teaching aids, and locally accessible materials. The principals' encouragement reduced the tendency to see limited facilities as an excuse and instead stimulated teachers to seek practical solutions. For example, teachers used objects from the surrounding environment to explain learning material and adjusted teaching strategies to students' daily experiences.

The fourth impact was increased student confidence and participation. Students in both schools were motivated to participate in academic and non-academic competitions, and the principals supported them through encouragement, recognition, and teacher mentoring. Student awards and trophies documented by the schools indicate that achievement culture was developing despite geographical constraints. This finding shows that principal leadership indirectly shapes student outcomes through motivation, school climate, and teacher support.

The fifth impact was stronger community participation. Parents and community members showed greater trust when school programs were communicated openly and when principals invited them to participate in meetings and school activities. In remote schools, community support is highly significant because families and local communities often compensate for limitations in formal support systems. The findings therefore suggest that transformational leadership in 3T areas operates not only inside the school but also through the broader social relationship between school and community.

Supporting and inhibiting factors

Several factors supported the implementation of transformational leadership in both schools. The most important internal factor was teacher solidarity. Although teachers worked with limited facilities and sometimes carried multiple responsibilities, they continued to support school programs and cooperate with the principal. A second factor was principal commitment. Both principals showed a willingness to remain present, motivate teachers and students, and directly supervise activities despite difficult conditions. A third factor was community support. Parents and local communities remained concerned about children's education, attended school meetings, and supported school activities within their economic capacity. Operational assistance from government programs also helped schools maintain basic activities, although it was not sufficient to solve all infrastructure problems. Finally, students' learning motivation became a strong social resource because students continued to participate in school activities and competitions.

The inhibiting factors were also substantial. Infrastructure limitation was the most visible obstacle. Both schools lacked adequate laboratories, digital learning resources, stable electricity, stable internet access, and sanitation facilities. Geographical isolation also constrained school development because distance, damaged roads, and difficult terrain affected teacher mobility, student access, supervision, and the distribution of educational resources. Teacher shortages and limited access to professional training further restricted learning innovation. These barriers show that principal leadership can improve school resilience, but structural support remains necessary to improve long-term educational quality in 3T areas.

Discussion

The findings indicate that transformational leadership in 3T schools must be understood as contextual and adaptive leadership. It cannot simply copy leadership practices from urban schools with better infrastructure and human resources. At SMP Negeri 28 Buru, the principal's relational and familial style was effective because it maintained emotional resilience among teachers. At SMP Negeri 37 Buru, the principal's firm and structured style was effective because it maintained organizational order. Both styles show that transformational leadership is not a single uniform method; rather, it is a set of values and behaviors that must be translated into the needs, culture, and constraints of the school context.

The implementation of idealized influence confirms Bass and Riggio's (2018) view that transformational leaders build influence not only through formal authority but also through credibility, consistency, and trust. In the two schools, the principals' direct involvement in daily activities became an important source of influence. This is particularly important in 3T areas because physical presence and moral example often have stronger effects than written instructions or administrative regulations.

Inspirational motivation in both schools also shows that leadership communication is essential in maintaining optimism. In isolated school environments, teachers and students may easily experience discouragement due to limited facilities, difficult access, and weak external support. Therefore, the principals' repeated messages about achievement, discipline, and collective responsibility helped create a sense of purpose. This supports Leithwood and Jantzi's (2005) argument that transformational leadership strengthens school culture through shared vision and collective commitment.

Intellectual stimulation in this study expands the meaning of innovation in low-resource schools. In many educational contexts, innovation is often associated with digital technology. However, in SMP Negeri 28 Buru and SMP Negeri 37 Buru, innovation was expressed through the use of local materials, environmental resources, and simple teaching aids. This finding is important because it shows that intellectual stimulation in 3T areas must be interpreted as adaptive problem solving rather than technology-dependent creativity.

Individualized consideration was also crucial for maintaining teacher and student commitment. Teachers in remote schools often face professional and emotional challenges, including limited training opportunities, distance from family, and heavy administrative tasks. The principals' personal attention helped teachers feel valued and supported. For students, personal encouragement increased confidence and participation in school activities. This confirms that individualized consideration is particularly important in low-resource schools where formal support systems are limited.

Overall, the findings contribute to educational management by showing that transformational leadership in 3T schools works through three contextual mechanisms: moral example, adaptive innovation, and social closeness. These mechanisms help schools maintain resilience, but they cannot fully replace the need for infrastructure improvement, teacher distribution, professional development, and technology access.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the principals of SMP Negeri 28 Buru and SMP Negeri 37 Buru implemented the four dimensions of transformational leadership in ways that were contextual and adaptive to 3T conditions. Idealized influence was reflected in discipline, responsibility, integrity, and role modeling. Inspirational motivation appeared in the construction of optimism, shared vision, and achievement culture. Intellectual stimulation was shown through encouragement for teachers to create simple and locally relevant learning innovations. Individualized consideration was expressed through personal guidance, emotional support, and attention to teacher and student needs.

The implementation of transformational leadership had positive effects on teacher discipline, work motivation, collaboration, learning creativity, student confidence, student participation, and community trust. Supporting factors included teacher cooperation, principal commitment, community involvement, government operational assistance, and students' motivation to learn. The main inhibiting factors were limited facilities, difficult geography, teacher shortage, weak access to professional development, limited technology, and the low economic capacity of some communities.

The scientific contribution of this study is the finding that transformational leadership in 3T schools is not merely the application of universal leadership dimensions, but an adaptive practice shaped by geographical isolation, social relations, and resource limitations. Therefore, strengthening principal leadership in 3T areas should be accompanied by policy support for infrastructure, teacher distribution, leadership training, professional development, and learning technology access.

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