



PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMATION IN REALIZING AN INSPIRATIONAL SCHOOL IN THE ERA OF MERDEKA BELAJAR: A CASE STUDY AT SD NEGERI SAWOJAJAR 01 BREBES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformational leadership practices of a school principal in realizing an inspirational school in the era of Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) at SD Negeri Sawojajar 01 Brebes. The research aims to analyze the four dimensions of transformational leadership-idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration-and their contribution to creating an inspirational school environment. A qualitative case study approach was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that the principal successfully implemented all four dimensions of transformational leadership. Idealized influence was demonstrated through ethical modeling and commitment. Inspirational motivation was evident in articulating a clear vision aligned with Merdeka Belajar. Intellectual stimulation was applied by encouraging teacher innovation and collaborative problem-solving. Individualized consideration was shown through personalized support and professional development. Supporting factors included the principal's strong commitment and adequate infrastructure, while challenges involved varying levels of teacher readiness and limited resources. The study concludes that transformational leadership plays a pivotal role in translating the Merdeka Belajar policy into an inspirational school culture, offering practical implications for principal training and policy implementation in elementary schools. This research contributes to the literature by providing an empirical and contextualized model of transformational leadership in Indonesian elementary education.

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INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Belajar policy initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia has brought about a fundamental paradigm shift in the delivery of education. This policy emphasizes freedom of thought, innovation, and flexibility, and is intended to cultivate a generation of learners who are critical, creative, and independent (Amin et al., 2025). Within this context, the role of the school principal becomes crucial as the spearhead of transformation. The principal is no longer merely an administrator, but is required to serve as a leader capable of inspiring, empowering, and mobilizing the entire school ecosystem toward meaningful change (Sari et al., 2025).

Transformational leadership is regarded as the model most relevant to addressing the challenges of the Merdeka Belajar era. This model emphasizes four principal dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Principals who adopt this leadership style are able to build a clear vision, serve as role models, encourage innovation, and provide personal attention to teachers and staff (Prasetyo et al., 2025). The implementation of transformational leadership has been shown to enhance teachers' readiness to face curricular change and to foster a culture of instructional innovation (Abidin et al., 2026).

Nevertheless, the implementation of transformational leadership in the Merdeka Belajar era is not free from challenges. Research indicates a gap between policy ideals and field realities, such as uneven teacher readiness, limited resources, and resistance to change (Marini et al., 2026). Consequently, an in-depth study is required to examine how principals actually transform their leadership in order to realize an inspirational school within a specific context. A case study at SD Negeri Sawojajar 01, Brebes, is therefore pertinent for exploring best practices and the dynamics that unfold at the elementary school level.

This study aims to: (1) analyze the transformational leadership practices of the school principal in realizing an inspirational school in the era of Merdeka Belajar; (2) identify the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of transformational leadership; and (3) formulate practical implications for the development of principal leadership. Through this research, it is expected that conceptual and practical contributions can be made to the development of educational management, particularly within the context of Merdeka Belajar implementation at the elementary school level.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to explore, in depth and in context, the principal's transformational leadership practices within their natural setting (Creswell, 2008). The research was conducted at SD Negeri Sawojajar 01, Wanasari District, Brebes Regency.

The research participants consisted of the school principal as the key informant, along with teachers and administrative staff as supporting informants. The data collection techniques comprised: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews to elicit participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections; (2) participatory observation to directly observe interactions and leadership practices within the school environment; and (3) documentary study to analyze school documents such as work plans, meeting minutes, and artifacts of school culture.

Data analysis was carried out through the processes of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, source and method triangulation were applied, along with member checking. The researcher also engaged in reflexivity in order to minimize subjective bias.

RESULTS

This section presents the principal findings concerning the principal's transformational leadership practices and the factors that influence them. The findings are presented in two main parts: (1) the principal's transformational leadership practices, and (2) supporting and inhibiting factors.

The Principal's Transformational Leadership Practices

The findings indicate that the principal of SD Negeri Sawojajar 01 has internalized and implemented the dimensions of transformational leadership to a significant degree.

Idealized Influence

The principal positions himself as a role model. He consistently demonstrates integrity, discipline, and a high level of commitment to his duties. Teachers reported that the principal is always punctual, actively involved in school activities, and does not hesitate to assume responsibility. Such exemplary conduct fosters respect and trust among all members of the school community. This practice is consistent with research findings emphasizing that effective principals must set an example in matters of ethics and commitment (Tjandra, 2025).

Inspirational Motivation

The principal has successfully articulated a clear and inspiring school vision, namely "The Realization of Learners of Strong Character, Creativity, and Achievement in the Era of Merdeka Belajar." This vision is communicated regularly across various forums, both formal and informal. He also frequently offers motivational words that build teachers' morale. Beyond this, the principal is able to connect the vision with practical objectives in day-to-day instruction, so that teachers perceive a clear sense of direction. This finding differs from several other studies which found that principals' inspirational motivation remained suboptimal owing to insufficient encouragement of innovation (Sari et al., 2025).

Intellectual Stimulation

The principal actively encourages teachers to innovate and think critically. He facilitates teachers' participation in training, workshops, and learning communities. He also creates a safe space for dialogue in which teachers may put forward new ideas. One flagship program is "Innovation Friday," in which teachers take turns presenting the good instructional practices they have implemented. This initiative fosters a collective culture of instructional innovation in which teachers learn from and inspire one another. This is consistent with findings that intellectual stimulation is key to developing teachers' creativity and innovation (Abidin et al., 2026).

Individualized Consideration

The principal demonstrates a high degree of personal attention to the needs of teachers and staff. He sets aside time to speak with them individually, listen to their concerns, and offer solutions. He also provides differentiated support according to each teacher's needs. Novice teachers, for example, require more intensive mentoring, whereas senior teachers are encouraged to serve as mentors. This personal support creates a supportive working climate and strengthens teacher loyalty. The dimension of individualized consideration was found to be the greatest contributor to building a culture of instructional innovation (Abidin et al., 2026).

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

The implementation of transformational leadership at SD Negeri Sawojajar 01 is supported by several factors. First, the principal's exceptionally high level of commitment and dedication. Second, the support of the majority of teachers, who are willing to change and to learn. Third, the availability of basic infrastructure such as internet access and adequate classroom facilities.

There are, however, inhibiting factors as well. First, teachers' readiness and digital competence remain uneven. Some senior teachers still find it difficult to adapt to instructional technology. Second, the heavy administrative workload occasionally reduces the time available to focus on developing instructional innovation. Third, budgetary constraints limit the provision of training and the procurement of more varied learning resources.

These challenges are consistent with the findings of other studies on the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in elementary schools (Marini et al., 2026).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that transformational leadership constitutes an effective approach to realizing an inspirational school in the era of Merdeka Belajar. The principal's success in implementing all four dimensions of transformational leadership demonstrates that this model can be adapted to the context of Indonesian elementary education.

The dimension of idealized influence, manifested through ethical modeling and commitment, aligns with the view that principals must serve as exemplars in building a positive school culture (Tjandra, 2025). Principals who are able to demonstrate integrity and strong dedication more readily earn the trust and support of the entire school community. This establishes a firm foundation for change toward a more inspirational school.

Inspirational motivation, realized through the articulation of a clear and inspiring vision, indicates that the principal has succeeded in bridging the ideals of the Merdeka Belajar policy and actual practice in the field. A vision that is communicated consistently and linked to day-to-day instructional objectives helps teachers understand their role in attaining shared goals. This finding differs from several studies which found that principals' inspirational motivation remained suboptimal in fostering innovation (Sari et al., 2025). This divergence may be attributable to differences in school context and in the characteristics of principals' leadership.

Intellectual stimulation, implemented through the "Innovation Friday" program and the facilitation of training, indicates that the principal functions as a catalyst for innovation. By creating a safe space for dialogue and encouraging teachers to experiment, the principal has cultivated a collective learning culture that supports continuous professional development. This is consistent with findings that intellectual stimulation is key to developing teachers' creativity and innovation (Abidin et al., 2026).

Individualized consideration, demonstrated through personal support and professional development tailored to each teacher's needs, underscores the importance of a humanistic approach to educational leadership. Principals who are able to understand and respond to teachers' individual needs are more effective in building motivation and commitment. This finding is consistent with research indicating that individualized consideration is the most significant dimension in building a culture of instructional innovation (Abidin et al., 2026).

The supporting and inhibiting factors identified provide a comprehensive picture of the complexity of implementing transformational leadership in elementary schools. Challenges such as uneven teacher readiness and limited resources are commonly encountered by schools across Indonesia (Marini et al., 2026). Adaptive and sustainable strategies are therefore required to address these challenges.

The practical implications of this study are as follows. First, it is important to develop leadership training programs that focus not only on managerial aspects but also on strengthening the dimensions of transformational leadership, particularly intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Second, more concrete policy support is needed to ease teachers' administrative burden so that they may focus more fully on improving instructional quality. Third, the model of transformational leadership implemented at SD Negeri Sawojajar 01 may serve as an example for other schools in implementing Merdeka Belajar, with the caveat that contextual adjustment is necessary.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the principal of SD Negeri Sawojajar 01 has effectively implemented transformational leadership in realizing an inspirational school in the era of Merdeka Belajar. The four dimensions of transformational leadership-idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized

consideration-are applied in an integrated and mutually reinforcing manner. These practices have created a collaborative, innovative, and supportive school environment, which in turn fosters the emergence of an inspirational school culture.

Even so, this implementation still faces challenges, particularly with respect to teacher readiness and limited resources. Continuous efforts are therefore required to develop teacher capacity and to provide adequate support. This study recommends that the transformational leadership model become a focus of professional development programs for school principals, and that further research be undertaken to measure the long-term impact of these practices on student learning outcomes

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