

A Comparative Study of Principals' Transformative Leadership: A Qualitative Analysis at SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung and SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong

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Abstract: This study explores the implementation of transformational leadership in two rural Indonesian schools SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung and SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong through a descriptive qualitative approach conducted from August 2024 to April 2025. Data were gathered via interviews, observations, and document analysis, and validated using triangulation of sources, techniques, and time, while analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings show that both principals demonstrated the four dimensions of transformational leadership as proposed by Bass: idealized influence through discipline and exemplary conduct, inspirational motivation through shared visions and slogans such as “*Solid Berbehan*”, intellectual stimulation by fostering innovation and scientific activities, and individualized consideration through personal mentoring and talent mapping. While SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung’s strengths lie in leadership discipline and teacher innovation but face challenges in student communication, SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong demonstrates inclusive leadership and collaboration, though decision-making processes are less observable. Externally, parental support, school committees, and community expectations strongly reinforce leadership effectiveness. The novelty of this research lies in its comparative analysis of transformational leadership in rural Indonesia, highlighting how local culture and stakeholder dynamics shape school leadership practices. It contributes to the literature by providing contextualized insights into the implementation of transformative leadership and offers practical implications for school leaders and policymakers seeking to enhance leadership performance through innovation and community engagement.

Keywords: Contextual, Transformative Leadership, Educational, Case Study, School Management

A. Introduction

School management plays a central role in determining the quality of education and the overall achievement of educational institutions in Indonesia. The principal not only bears administrative responsibilities but also serves as a leader who creates a conducive school atmosphere, inspires teachers, and encourages students to fully develop their potential.

The leadership style adopted by the principal has a significant influence on the effectiveness of educational institutions in achieving their goals.

At the senior high school (SMA) level, which continues from junior high school (SMP) and acts as a prerequisite before entering higher education, the managerial role of the principal becomes increasingly crucial. This stage of education is regulated by several national policies, such as Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which classifies high schools as part of general secondary education. In addition, Government Regulation No. 4 of 2022 an amendment to Government Regulation No. 57 of 2021 on National Education Standards sets out quality criteria for secondary education. Furthermore, Law No. 23 of 2014 on Regional Government places the responsibility for secondary education under provincial authority, while Government Regulation No. 87 of 2017 on Strengthening Character Education underscores the importance of moral, social, and national values in character development.

As the central figure in a school, the principal is responsible for leading and motivating all organizational components, including human resources, facilities, and time management. Julaiha (2019) emphasized the importance of principals in designing strategic programs to achieve educational goals, while Fitri (2020) noted that principals are responsible not only for operational management but also for improving the quality of learning. However, the perception of principals as merely administrative officers persists. Purwoko (2018) argued that principals are often seen as preoccupied with bureaucratic tasks, such as correspondence and formal meetings, rather than actively contributing to improving teaching quality. In reality, effective leadership requires involvement in curriculum development, supervision of teaching, and the creation of a supportive learning environment.

Transformational leadership is increasingly viewed as an effective approach for school principals to drive change and innovation (Fadhilah, 2020). This style is particularly relevant in responding to contemporary challenges, given that many principals still focus more on administrative duties than on empowering educators, thereby diminishing motivation and performance (Naharin Suroyya, 2018). Transformational leaders are oriented toward long-term vision, innovation, and building progressive organizational cultures (Rahmawati, 2020). Consequently, principal rotation should be seen as an opportunity to introduce adaptive and innovative leadership (Maris et al., 2016).

The concept of transformational leadership was first introduced by Burns (1978), who emphasized shared commitment between leaders and followers to organizational values and vision (Wiradji, 2009). Bass and Riggio later developed this idea by identifying four core dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Makmuriana, 2021). In educational contexts, transformational leadership has been shown to enhance teaching and learning quality while empowering all school stakeholders to develop optimally. School principals who embrace this style are expected to inspire teachers and foster student enthusiasm for achievement (Handayani et al., 2023; Fadhilah, 2020).

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Research has documented issues such as weak communication, limited learning innovation, and lack of trust between principals and teachers (Abadi, 2020). Inadequate support for teachers' professional development further

hampers teaching quality (Wahyuni & Maunah, 2021). Principals who make unilateral decisions without staff participation tend to suppress initiative and motivation (Purwoko, 2018), especially in the absence of a clear vision (Rivai, 2020). By contrast, principals with transformational approaches foster collaborative cultures supported by transparent, participatory communication (Sari, 2017) and ensure sustained support for professional development while promoting positive change (Handayani et al., 2023).

Geographical contexts also influence leadership practices. In North Tapanuli Regency (TAPUT), North Sumatra Province, schools face unique educational challenges shaped by rural settings. SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung and SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong both A-accredited schools represent leading institutions in the region, yet with different characteristics. SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung, ranked 393rd nationally in the 2022 UTBK scores (Ministry of Education and Culture, D), is noted for its strong academic reputation. SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong, while also A-accredited, serves a more diverse student body with different community dynamics. Initial observations indicate that both schools experience communication barriers linked to differences in position, experience, and age among stakeholders. Although principals make efforts to learn and motivate, the transformational leadership dimensions of vision-building, innovation, and work motivation are not fully optimized.

Previous studies have shown that leadership transitions do not always lead to improved staff performance (Yuli et al., 2023), and persistent challenges such as weak principal-teacher communication (Faruq & Supriyanto, 2020; Wahyuni & Maunah, 2021), lack of role models (Sinaga et al., 2021; Armiyanti et al., 2023), and limited capacity to provide direction (Muktamar et al., 2023) hinder school development. These findings point to significant challenges in implementing transformational leadership, especially where organizational culture resists change.

Despite these insights, the existing literature rarely examines transformational leadership comparatively in schools with different organizational, social, and community contexts in rural Indonesia. This gap underscores the need for a contextualized analysis that considers how local dynamics influence leadership practices. Therefore, this research aims to explore and compare the implementation of transformational leadership in SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung and SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong, offering insights into local challenges and opportunities. By doing so, it contributes not only to educational leadership theory but also to policy design, particularly in developing leadership training programs adapted to regional characteristics.

B. Method

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach, chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of the complex phenomenon of transformational leadership in education. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for addressing the questions of *how* and *why* transformational leadership is implemented in specific school contexts, as it allows the researcher to capture not only leadership practices but also the meanings and dynamics experienced by stakeholders.

The research was conducted over an eight-month period, from August 2024 to April 2025, at two public senior high schools in North Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia:

SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung and SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong. This extended timeframe ensured that leadership behaviors, interactions, and programs could be observed comprehensively across different school activities and academic cycles.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select informants, based on their roles, experiences, and relevance to the research objectives. The principal was chosen as the primary subject, given their role as the central leader of the school. Senior teachers were included for their capacity to observe and assess leadership practices in daily classroom and school management activities. Administrative staff were selected to provide perspectives on leadership in relation to operational and bureaucratic processes. Students were also engaged as informants, as they directly experienced the outcomes of leadership in terms of motivation, learning environment, and school culture. This multi-perspective sampling ensured a more holistic understanding of leadership practices.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and documentation analysis. Interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, enabling participants to articulate their experiences and perceptions freely. Observations focused on leadership behaviors during meetings, classroom supervision, and school events, while documentation included school vision and mission statements, leadership programs, internal reports, and other relevant school documents.

To ensure data credibility and trustworthiness, multiple forms of triangulation were applied. First, source triangulation was conducted by comparing principals' accounts of leadership styles with the perspectives of teachers and students. Second, technique triangulation involved validating interview data through observations and documentation, ensuring consistency across methods. Third, time triangulation was applied by collecting data at several points throughout the research period, allowing the researcher to capture changes and patterns in leadership practices over time. For instance, principals' strategies during the beginning of the academic year were compared with those later in the semester, strengthening the robustness of findings.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes three stages: (1) data reduction, involving coding, summarizing, and selecting relevant information; (2) data display, through the organization of findings into themes, matrices, and narrative descriptions; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, which entailed interpreting patterns, cross-checking interpretations with data, and refining insights through iterative analysis. This model was selected for its flexibility in managing complex qualitative data and its suitability for generating nuanced thematic understandings of leadership practices within educational settings.

C. Results and Discussion

Result

Transformational Leadership Practices in SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung and SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong

The findings reveal that principals at both SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung and SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong implemented transformational leadership across Bass's four dimensions

idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. However, differences were evident in emphasis, style, and contextual adaptation. The analysis below presents findings per dimension, followed by a comparative synthesis.

1. Idealized Influence

At SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung, the principal demonstrated idealized influence through discipline, integrity, and strong moral exemplarity. He was consistently perceived as a role model who fostered accountability, democratic communication, and trust. His punctuality, simplicity, and active participation in daily routines reinforced an ethical school culture.

In contrast, at SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong, the principal's idealized influence was expressed less through discipline and more through inclusive leadership. Teachers and staff highlighted his openness and ability to involve multiple voices in decision-making. Rather than emphasizing strict rule enforcement, he was perceived as approachable, encouraging collaboration across hierarchies and valuing participation. Comparatively, while both principals embodied values of trust and respect, SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung's leadership emphasized discipline and professionalism, whereas SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong emphasized inclusivity and participatory decision-making.

2. Inspirational Motivation

At SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung, inspirational motivation was communicated through the principal's shared vision and motivational routines. Slogans such as "*Solid Berbehan*" embodied collective spirit and cultural values of cooperation. Weekly briefings provided direction and encouragement, while support for teacher training reinforced optimism despite limited external resources.

At SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong, the principal's inspirational motivation centered on collaboration and shared ownership of goals. Teachers noted that he frequently emphasized teamwork and long-term growth, rather than slogans or formal routines. Students reported feeling supported in preparing for national exams, though the motivational approach was more individualized than collective. Comparatively, SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung relied on symbolic expressions of vision (e.g., slogans, routines), while SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong cultivated motivation through collaborative practices and interpersonal encouragement.

3. Intellectual Stimulation

At SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung, the principal actively promoted innovation and professional development. Teachers were encouraged to integrate digital platforms, explore cultural values in lessons, and participate in scientific writing. Weekly meetings and P5 character-strengthening programs facilitated collaborative problem-solving. Students were provided opportunities to exercise creativity through student council elections, arts activities, and academic competitions.

At SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong, intellectual stimulation was also evident but took a less structured form. Teachers described being invited to contribute ideas during planning, though without the same level of systematic coaching as at SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung. Innovation tended to emerge from teacher collaboration rather than principal-led initiatives. Students also engaged in extracurricular and cultural activities, but

opportunities for structured critical thinking development were reported as less frequent. Comparatively, SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung emphasized structured innovation and formal professional development, while SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong fostered intellectual stimulation more informally, relying on collaborative culture rather than systematic programming.

4. Individualized Consideration

At SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung, individualized consideration was demonstrated through mentoring, tailored task assignments, and flexible workload adjustments for staff. The principal maintained personal communication with students, offering consultation and non-punitive disciplinary approaches. High-achieving students were given additional coaching, while extracurricular grouping was aligned with individual interests.

At SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong, individualized consideration was visible in the principal's emphasis on listening and building personal relationships. Teachers described him as approachable and empathetic, though professional development initiatives were less formalized compared to SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung. Students noted his accessibility for personal and academic concerns, though institutional documentation showed fewer structured mentoring activities. Comparatively, SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung's individualized consideration was systematic and structured, while SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong emphasized relational and empathetic support.

The comparative findings highlight distinct leadership orientations shaped by both institutional characteristics and local cultural context. SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung's principal projected a leadership style anchored in discipline, structured innovation, and systematic mentoring. In contrast, SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong's principal cultivated inclusivity, collaboration, and relational support.

Comparative Analysis

The comparative findings highlight distinct leadership orientations shaped by both institutional characteristics and local cultural context. SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung's principal projected a leadership style anchored in discipline, structured innovation, and systematic mentoring. In contrast, SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong's principal cultivated inclusivity, collaboration, and relational support.

These differences align with Bass and Riggio's (2006) framework, but they also reveal contextual nuances. For example, the slogan "*Solid Berbehan*" at SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung reflects not only inspirational motivation but also embodies Batak cultural values of mutual cooperation and solidarity, showing how local culture infuses leadership practices. At SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong, the principal's emphasis on inclusivity and collaboration resonates with the rural community's expectations of collective participation in school affairs. While both schools demonstrated transformational leadership, their approaches illustrate that context matters: leadership in rural Indonesian settings adapts not only to institutional needs but also to community norms and cultural expectations.

The findings extend prior research (e.g., Fadhilah, 2020; Handayani et al., 2023) by showing that transformational leadership is not monolithic but varies according to local social dynamics and cultural values. Whereas earlier studies often framed principals as overly

administrative (Purwoko, 2018), this study demonstrates that rural principals can enact transformational roles, albeit with different emphases.

SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung's structured approach reflects a context where high academic expectations (e.g., UTBK ranking, accreditation) demand disciplined, systematic leadership. Conversely, SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong's collaborative and inclusive approach reflects the importance of relational trust in a school serving a diverse rural community. This suggests that the effectiveness of transformational leadership depends on its contextual adaptability.

Overall, the study contributes to the literature by showing how transformational leadership is mediated by local culture (Batak values), rural educational challenges, and community expectations, offering insights into leadership practices in contexts often underexplored in international educational leadership research.

Discussion

Transformational Leadership of the Principal of SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung

The transformational leadership applied by the principal at SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung plays a significant role in shaping an educational environment that is progressive, adaptive, and focused on developing individual potential. Referring to the concept put forward by Bass in Makmuriana (2021), transformational leadership includes four main dimensions, namely Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration.

The results of the study show that these four dimensions have been realizedly actualized in the leadership practice of school principals. Through triangulation of data from interviews, observations, documentation, and cross-verification between sources, it was found that principals consistently build strong interpersonal relationships with teachers and students, convey evocative visions, encourage innovative and collaborative learning, and show concern for individual needs and development in schools. These findings indicate the implementation of holistic transformational leadership in encouraging improvement in the quality of education and creating a positive school climate. The following description outlines the four dimensions:

Idealized Influence

The principal appears as an exemplary figure in terms of discipline, honesty, and openness in the decision-making process. In accordance with Bass's theory in Makmuriana (2021), transformational leaders must be role models who can inspire their subordinates. Interviews with teachers and staff revealed that the principal was always present on time, showed high work discipline, and provided motivation through concrete actions. A leadership style that is not authoritarian but remains firm and democratic helps to form a harmonious school environment. The practice of participatory decision-making, as described by Asbari et al. (2022), fosters mutual respect and trust in the school community.

The principal also actively motivates students, both through briefings during morning apples, filling empty classes, and going directly to academic and non-academic activities. This role is strengthened by the involvement of the principal in establishing relationships with the community and other stakeholders. As explained by Burns in Makmuriana (2021),

transformational leaders build trust and respect within their communities. Observation and documentation support the existence of this dimension in the leadership of the principal.

Inspirational Motivation

Inspirational motivation is reflected in the principal's efforts to internalize the school's vision and mission into the daily lives of school residents. In accordance with the opinion of Handayani et al. (2023), transformational leaders are effective in communicating a strong vision and building a collective spirit. School principals encourage teacher professional development through training and provide support for career development, as also stated by Faruq and Supriyanto (2020). Researchers found that school principals actively facilitated teachers and staff to achieve better career levels.

The principal's participation in accompanying students during the learning process, including by providing exam practice questions and weekly briefings, shows a commitment to students' academic achievement (Yuli et al., 2023). Success in this aspect is marked by increased enthusiasm for teachers in participating in the Merdeka Mengajar (PMM) program and increased student participation in various school activities, including annual religious activities.

Intellectual Stimulation

The principal plays a role as a driver of innovation by encouraging teachers and students to think critically and creatively. Bass's theory in Makmuriana (2021) states that transformational leaders challenge conventional thinking and encourage the search for new solutions. The researcher noted that teachers are given space to develop innovative teaching methods, including technology integration, as well as that the principal supports students in student council activities, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), and other academic activities.

Principal's leadership that accommodates criticism and suggestions from teachers and staff reflects an open managerial environment. This is in line with the thinking of Maris et al. (2016) that transformational leaders foster creativity and innovative problem-solving. Improving the quality of academic results and diversity of learning methods are indicators of the success of the implementation of this dimension.

Individualized Consideration

The principal shows concern for the personal development of teachers, staff, and students. Bass in Makmuriana (2021) states that transformational leaders support individual growth personally. Interviews show that the principal understands the needs of each individual and provides contextual solutions. Teachers are given the opportunity to participate in competency development training, while students receive intensive academic and non-academic guidance.

The principal also creates a work atmosphere that supports the welfare of staff through fair and supportive policies. The researcher also witnessed the implementation of PNM training in the teacher's room which was attended by school principals, teachers, staff, and speakers from the local education office. This approach is in line with the theory of Armiyanti et al. (2023) which emphasizes the importance of human resource development in transformational leadership.

Overall, the implementation of the four dimensions of transformational leadership at SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung has made a significant contribution to improving teacher performance, student motivation, and positive work culture at school. This inspiring environment supports the formation of competitive students' character and competencies in the global era. In line with Burns and Bass' theory in Harsoyo (2022), leadership based on motivation, inspiration, and individual attention is essential to drive sustainable change in educational organizations. Therefore, the principal of SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung can be used as a model of transformational leadership practice that is effective and transformative in the context of Indonesian education.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that transformational leadership by school principals plays a pivotal role in shaping innovative, collaborative, and motivating educational environments in rural Indonesia. Both SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung and SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong applied Bass's four dimensions of transformational leadership idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration yet with distinct emphases. At SMA Negeri 3 Tarutung, leadership was characterized by discipline, structured innovation, and democratic involvement, which fostered strong organizational culture and teacher performance, though challenges in student communication persisted. By contrast, SMA Negeri 1 Siborongborong emphasized inclusivity, emotional connection, and participatory dialogue, creating a supportive climate reinforced by cultural values expressed through the slogan "*Solid Berbenah*."

Theoretically, these findings extend the literature on transformational leadership by showing how local culture, rural contexts, and community expectations shape leadership practices differently even within the same region. They illustrate that transformational leadership is not a uniform construct but is contextually adapted to institutional needs and sociocultural dynamics. Practically, the study provides insights for principals and education policymakers: school leaders should balance discipline with inclusivity, strengthen teacher innovation, and engage community stakeholders to enhance school performance. Local governments can also support principals by tailoring leadership training programs to address both managerial and humanistic aspects of transformational leadership.

This study, however, is limited by its focus on two schools in a single regency and the qualitative nature of the data, which may restrict broader generalization. Future research could adopt mixed-methods or quantitative approaches to measure the impact of transformational leadership on student outcomes across larger samples. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to capture how leadership adaptation unfolds over time in response to educational and social changes.

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