

Implementation of Transformational Leadership by Principals to Improve Teacher Motivation and Performance in The Digital Era

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Abstract :

This study explores the implementation of transformational leadership among principals in Islamic Senior High Schools in Indonesia within the context of the digital era. The study aims to analyze how transformational leadership influences teacher motivation and performance, to identify the leadership roles of principals, and to examine the challenges and strategies applied in digital educational transformation. Employing a qualitative descriptive multi-case study design, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis from two Islamic Senior High Schools located in Serang Regency and Serang City. The findings reveal that principals successfully applied the four dimensions of transformational leadership (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) in guiding teachers through digital adaptation. They acted as motivators, facilitators, and innovators, fostering collaboration and professional growth through digital initiatives. The integration of Islamic moral values such as amanah (trustworthiness), adl (justice), and ihsan (excellence) enriched the leadership's ethical and spiritual foundation. Despite facing challenges such as digital inequality, limited infrastructure, and resistance to change, the principals implemented adaptive strategies, including continuous professional development, mentoring, and spiritual reinforcement. The study concludes that transformational leadership grounded in Islamic ethics and digital competence significantly enhances teacher motivation and performance, offering a sustainable framework for educational transformation in the 21st century.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Teacher Motivation, Teacher Performance, Digital Era, Islamic Education.

Abstrak :

Studi ini mengeksplorasi implementasi kepemimpinan transformasional di kalangan kepala sekolah di SMA Islam di Indonesia dalam konteks era digital. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana kepemimpinan transformasional memengaruhi motivasi dan kinerja guru, untuk mengidentifikasi peran kepemimpinan kepala sekolah, dan untuk memeriksa tantangan dan strategi yang diterapkan dalam transformasi pendidikan digital. Dengan menggunakan desain studi multi-kasus deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen dari dua SMA Islam yang berlokasi di Kabupaten Serang dan Kota Serang. Temuan tersebut mengungkapkan bahwa kepala sekolah berhasil menerapkan empat dimensi kepemimpinan transformasional (pengaruh ideal, motivasi inspirasional, stimulasi intelektual, dan pertimbangan individual) dalam membimbing guru melalui adaptasi digital. Mereka bertindak sebagai motivator, fasilitator, dan inovator, mendorong kolaborasi dan pertumbuhan profesional melalui inisiatif digital. Integrasi nilai-nilai moral Islam seperti *amanah* (kepercayaan), *adl* (keadilan), dan *ihsan* (keunggulan) memperkaya landasan etika dan spiritual kepemimpinan. Meskipun menghadapi tantangan seperti ketidakesetaraan digital, infrastruktur yang terbatas, dan resistensi terhadap perubahan, para kepala sekolah menerapkan strategi adaptif, termasuk pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan, pendampingan, dan penguatan spiritual. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa kepemimpinan transformasional yang didasarkan pada etika Islam dan kompetensi digital secara signifikan meningkatkan motivasi dan kinerja guru, menawarkan kerangka kerja yang berkelanjutan untuk transformasi pendidikan di abad ke-21.

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan Transformasional, Motivasi Guru, Kinerja Guru, Era Digital, Pendidikan Islam.



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INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented acceleration in digital transformation across all sectors, including education. Advances in information and communication technology (ICT) have reshaped how schools operate, how teachers teach, and how students learn. This rapid shift has been further amplified by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which compelled educational institutions worldwide to adopt remote and hybrid learning systems almost overnight (Zhao, 2020; Lim et al., 2022). In this evolving digital ecosystem, school leaders are no longer expected to function merely as administrators or managers; rather, they are required to become visionaries and change agents who can inspire, guide, and empower their institutions through technological and pedagogical transitions (Hallinger & Kovacevic, 2021).

The concept of leadership in the digital era extends beyond technical competence. It demands the ability to integrate moral, emotional, and cultural intelligence into digital transformation efforts (Ng, 2022). For schools, this means developing leadership that not only understands technology but also aligns it with the school's values, culture, and mission. In the case of Islamic education, such leadership must ensure that the process of digital transformation does not compromise spiritual and ethical foundations. As noted by Hussin (2023), the strength of Islamic educational leadership lies in its capacity to merge technological innovation with moral responsibility, guided by the principles of *amanah* (trust), *adl* (justice), and *ihsan* (excellence). This intersection of faith and innovation offers a unique lens for understanding leadership practices that balance modern efficiency with ethical integrity.

Transformational leadership provides one of the most relevant frameworks for leading such change. Rooted in the seminal works of Burns (1978) and later refined by Bass and Riggio (2006), transformational leadership emphasizes four interrelated dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Together, these dimensions foster organizational growth through inspiration, trust, and empowerment rather than through authority or control. Recent studies reaffirm the continuing relevance of transformational leadership in education, particularly in enhancing teacher motivation, professional development, and innovation (Leithwood et al., 2020; Alghamdi, 2023; Hallinger, 2021). In the digital context, transformational leaders play a crucial role in facilitating change by building shared vision, supporting technological learning, and maintaining emotional stability among teachers facing new challenges (Nguyen, 2023).

Within Islamic educational settings, the transformative power of leadership is closely tied to spiritual and moral dimensions. Leadership in Islam is fundamentally ethical, rooted in the belief that every leader is a trustee (*khalifah*) accountable before God for the welfare of their community (Rahman, 2019). Therefore, transformational leadership in Islamic schools is not only about achieving institutional performance but also about nurturing moral integrity and character among teachers and students. As Alhumaid (2020) and Mubarok and Nuraeni (2020) highlight, the fusion of spirituality and professionalism provides a distinct model for leadership that is value-driven, community-oriented, and transformative. By linking leadership behavior to Qur'anic ethics and Prophetic traditions (*uswah hasanah*), Islamic school principals embody a holistic form of leadership that harmonizes the material and spiritual aspects of education.

Despite the abundant global literature on transformational leadership, there remains a scarcity of empirical studies exploring how it manifests in the specific context of Islamic education, particularly amid digital transformation. Most previous research

has focused on secular or Western schooling systems, where moral and faith-based dimensions are rarely integrated into leadership models (Ng, 2022; Nguyen, 2023). Consequently, there is a need to examine how transformational leadership functions in environments where spiritual values play a central role in institutional culture and decision-making. In Indonesia home to one of the world's largest Islamic education systems understanding how principals enact transformational leadership within digital education initiatives is particularly important for ensuring the quality and sustainability of reform efforts (Lestari & Supardi, 2021; Santoso & Wijaya, 2022).

Moreover, digital transformation has introduced complex challenges that go beyond the technical adoption of technology. Schools must deal with issues of teacher readiness, infrastructural gaps, digital ethics, and the risk of value erosion due to overreliance on technology (Hallinger, 2021; Harahap & Huda, 2022). In Islamic education, these challenges are further complicated by the need to maintain religious identity while engaging with global digital cultures. Principals are therefore called to lead with both technological competence and moral discernment, ensuring that innovation serves pedagogical and spiritual objectives simultaneously. The question is not merely whether Islamic school leaders can adopt technology, but whether they can do so in ways that preserve educational authenticity and spiritual coherence.

This study responds to that need by exploring how transformational leadership is implemented by principals in Islamic Senior High Schools in Indonesia, particularly in the context of digital adaptation. By focusing on leadership behavior, teacher motivation, and institutional strategies, the study aims to illuminate how value-based leadership can support effective digital transformation in faith-based institutions. Specifically, it seeks to analyze the implementation of transformational leadership during digital change, examine the principal's role in improving teacher motivation and performance, and identify the challenges and strategies applied in Islamic educational contexts. The results of this research are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically by enriching the literature on transformational leadership within Islamic education, and by providing empirical insights for practitioners and policymakers striving to balance innovation with ethics in school management.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using a multi-case study approach to capture the dynamics of leadership practices within two Islamic Senior High Schools in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of how transformational leadership is experienced and perceived by teachers and administrators (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. Participants included principals, vice-principals, and teachers. Semi-structured interviews explored the application of the four dimensions of transformational leadership idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Observations focused on leadership behaviors, digital activities, and teacher interactions, while school reports and strategic documents were analyzed for supporting evidence.

Data Analysis. The analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) model: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation was conducted across data sources and techniques to ensure validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). **Research Context.** Both schools are medium-sized Islamic institutions actively integrating digital technology while maintaining Islamic pedagogical values. This context allowed for a comprehensive exploration of how transformational leadership interacts with digital transformation and religious ethos.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed that the principals in the observed Islamic Senior High Schools demonstrated all four dimensions of transformational leadership as proposed by Bass and Riggio (2006), adapted to meet the challenges of digital transformation in education. The dimension of idealized influence was evident in how principals modeled ethical behavior, professionalism, and commitment to school improvement. Their integrity inspired trust and respect among teachers, creating a shared moral foundation for collaboration. This finding aligns with more recent research emphasizing that effective school leadership in the digital era must integrate moral example and ethical decision-making as the core of trust-building (Hallinger & Kovacevic, 2021; Hussin, 2023). In the Islamic context, such behavior mirrors the Qur'anic concept of *uswah hasanah* leadership through moral example emphasizing character and sincerity as essential leadership traits (Rahman, 2019).

The element of inspirational motivation emerged as principals communicated a clear and inspiring vision for digital transformation, positioning technology integration not only as a technical necessity but as a shared moral responsibility toward educational excellence. Through motivational meetings and reflective discussions, principals encouraged teachers to perceive digital adoption as an act of *jihad al-ilm* a pursuit of excellence through knowledge. This approach resonates with findings by Lestari and Supardi (2021), who argue that visionary school leaders who combine moral values and digital innovation tend to foster higher teacher engagement and institutional resilience. Inspirational motivation also helped to align the staff's collective purpose with the institution's mission, contributing to a positive organizational climate conducive to change (Hallinger, 2021; Alhumaid, 2020).

In terms of intellectual stimulation, the principals consistently encouraged teachers to innovate in their teaching methods, experiment with digital learning tools, and integrate technology into their instructional practices. Teachers were invited to explore digital learning management systems, online assessments, and collaborative platforms to enhance classroom interactivity. This practice reflects recent findings that transformational leaders promote a "culture of learning" that empowers teachers to think creatively and adaptively in the face of technological advancement (Ng, 2022; Alghamdi, 2023). In this study, teachers were given autonomy to take risks and develop digital competence, confirming that intellectual stimulation supports professional growth and problem-solving skills (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020).

Individualized consideration was equally evident, as principals provided personalized mentoring and support to teachers with varying levels of digital literacy. They paid close attention to teachers' individual needs, offering moral encouragement and technical assistance through formal coaching and peer collaboration. This approach aligns with contemporary perspectives on empathetic and inclusive leadership, which stress the importance of emotional intelligence and personalized engagement in sustaining teacher motivation (Shaturaev & Bekimbetova, 2022; Northouse, 2021). In the Islamic leadership tradition, this approach reflects *rahmah* compassion and care for followers ensuring that leadership is both empowering and human-centered (Mubarok & Nuraeni, 2020).

Overall, these leadership practices rooted in moral integrity, professional development, and digital adaptability created a positive and collaborative school climate. They supported the argument by Fullan (2021) that digital transformation in education is most successful when school leaders combine technological competence with relational trust and shared moral purpose.

The study also found that transformational leaders acted simultaneously as

motivators, facilitators, and innovators, reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of effective leadership. As motivators, principals reinforced teachers' intrinsic motivation through recognition, empowerment, and appreciation. Their leadership encouraged a sense of autonomy and professional pride among teachers, echoing Deci and Ryan's (2017) Self-Determination Theory, which highlights the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining motivation. Similarly, Khasanah and Fitriani (2021) found that teachers' performance improves significantly when principals actively reinforce motivation through participatory communication and mutual respect.

As facilitators, principals provided access to digital tools, infrastructure, and professional learning communities. They cultivated a culture of collaboration and peer support to accelerate teachers' adaptation to digital pedagogies. This practice is consistent with Ismail and Ahmad's (2020) findings that continuous digital mentoring and community-based learning improve teacher self-efficacy and organizational learning capacity. Moreover, the principals' role as facilitators aligns with the model of *collaborative professionalism* (Fullan & Quinn, 2020), where collective expertise becomes the foundation for sustainable school improvement.

As innovators, the principals initiated and supervised digital-based management systems that streamlined school operations and data-driven decision-making. They promoted innovation not as a mere trend but as a value embedded in the school's vision and faith-based educational philosophy. Their innovation-oriented mindset aligns with global studies highlighting the need for adaptive leadership that bridges educational technology and ethical accountability (Nguyen, 2023; Harahap & Huda, 2022). Through innovation, the principals enhanced not only efficiency but also teacher engagement and institutional relevance in the digital age.

Nevertheless, the implementation of transformational leadership was not without challenges. The most significant issues included limited technological infrastructure, uneven digital competence among teachers, and resistance to change from some senior staff. These findings echo research by Alghamdi (2023) and Lim et al. (2022), who note that technological transformation in education often faces barriers of infrastructure and mindset. Principals addressed these obstacles through adaptive strategies that emphasized professional development, mentorship, and spiritual reinforcement. They conducted regular digital training sessions, fostered peer mentoring relationships between digitally skilled and less skilled teachers, and implemented recognition programs to reward innovation. Additionally, they reframed digital adaptation as part of spiritual excellence or *ihsan*, inspiring teachers to pursue technological literacy as a reflection of their responsibility before God (Rahman, 2019).

These adaptive strategies demonstrate the principles of modern adaptive and value-based leadership, which combine flexibility, empathy, and moral conviction to drive organizational transformation (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2019; Al-Fraihat, 2021). Such integration of moral and technological dimensions allowed transformational leadership to function effectively in the digital and faith-based context of Islamic education.

In broader discussion, the study confirms that transformational leadership contributes significantly to improving teacher motivation and performance by cultivating trust, collaboration, and innovation. Effective transformational leaders, as Avolio et al. (2018) and Hallinger (2021) suggest, inspire teachers not only intellectually but also emotionally and ethically. Within Islamic educational institutions, the moral and spiritual dimension of leadership amplifies this effect by grounding technological adaptation in ethical and theological principles (Mubarok & Nuraeni, 2020; Hussin, 2023). This integration fosters *tarbiyah* the holistic nurturing of

professional competence and spiritual character. The findings thus extend current scholarship by demonstrating how faith-based educational leaders successfully navigate the intersection between digital transformation and Islamic moral values. Leadership in such contexts, therefore, must be seen not only as a managerial process but as a moral endeavor that harmonizes technology, ethics, and humanity in shaping future-oriented education.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study emphasizes that transformational leadership plays a strategic, multidimensional, and moral role in improving teacher motivation and performance in the context of digital transformation in Islamic educational institutions. The implementation of the four main dimensions of transformational leadership of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration has proven to be effective when combined with Islamic values such as amanah, 'adl, rahmah, and ihsan, resulting in visionary, ethical, and contextual leadership practices. The findings of the study show that madrasah heads not only play the role of administrators, but also as moral coaches, motivators, facilitators, and innovators who are able to foster a collaborative, adaptive, and continuous improvement-oriented culture. The integration of digital competencies and spiritual integrity makes transformational leadership a framework that is aligned with the mission of Islamic education in holistic human development. This research also expands the horizons of leadership theory by showing how global leadership models can be localized within religious normative frameworks, as well as providing practical implications for the development of value-based leadership training programs for Islamic education policymakers and practitioners. Thus, the study confirms that transformational leadership rooted in moral spirituality and digital proficiency offers a sustainable and comprehensive approach to the reconstruction of Islamic education in the 21st century era.

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