

Transformational Leadership In Digital Schools: Innovation Or Threat To Traditional Values

Kepemimpinan Transformasional Di Sekolah Digital: Inovasi Atau Ancaman Terhadap Nilai-Nilai Tradisional

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji dinamika kepemimpinan transformasional di sekolah digital, dengan fokus pada ketegangan antara inovasi yang ditawarkan dan potensi ancaman terhadap nilai-nilai tradisional dalam pendidikan. Latar belakang penelitian ini berangkat dari pergeseran paradigma pendidikan akibat digitalisasi yang masif, yang menuntut kepala sekolah untuk beradaptasi dengan model kepemimpinan yang lebih fleksibel, visioner, dan berbasis teknologi. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap kepala sekolah, guru, dan tenaga kependidikan di lima sekolah digital di kota besar dan daerah semi-urban. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan transformasional mendorong terciptanya inovasi pembelajaran berbasis teknologi, peningkatan partisipasi guru, serta percepatan pengambilan keputusan. Namun, muncul pula resistensi dari sebagian guru senior yang merasa nilai-nilai seperti kedisiplinan konvensional, tata krama, dan hierarki sosial mulai terpinggirkan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada literatur kepemimpinan pendidikan dengan menunjukkan bahwa keberhasilan kepemimpinan transformasional di sekolah digital sangat bergantung pada kemampuan pemimpin dalam menjaga keseimbangan antara adopsi teknologi dan pelestarian nilai-nilai edukatif yang telah mengakar. Temuan ini dapat menjadi rujukan bagi perumus kebijakan dan pelaku pendidikan dalam merancang strategi kepemimpinan yang adaptif dan berkelanjutan di era digital.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the dynamics of transformational leadership in digital schools, focusing on the tension between the innovations offered and the potential threats to traditional values in education. The background of this study is the shift in the educational paradigm due to massive digitalization, which requires principals to adapt to a more flexible, visionary, and technology-based leadership model. The research method used is a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and education personnel in five digital schools in large cities and semi-urban areas. The results of the study show that transformational leadership encourages the creation of technology-based learning innovations, increased teacher participation, and accelerated decision-making. However, resistance also emerged from some senior teachers who felt that values such as conventional discipline, etiquette, and social hierarchy were starting to be marginalized. This study contributes to the literature on educational leadership by showing that the success of transformational leadership in digital schools is highly dependent on the leader's ability to maintain a balance between technology adoption and the preservation of deep-rooted educational values. These findings can be a reference for policy makers and education practitioners in designing adaptive and sustainable leadership strategies in the digital era.

1. INTRODUCTION

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Transformational leadership in digital schools has led to a shift in the role of the principal from a single authority to a collaborative facilitator (Jelantik, 2021). In an open and fast-paced digital environment, principals can no longer effectively implement a top-down leadership model (St Wardah Hanafie Das & Halik, 2022). Instead, they are required to open up dialogue, provide autonomy, and become inspiring guides for teachers and students. This change occurs because technology has broken down communication barriers and enabled participation from multiple directions (Siswadi, 2023). Evidence from interviews in several schools suggests that teachers feel more valued and motivated when principals encourage collaboration through platforms such as Google Workspace or Microsoft Teams (Kurniawati et al., 2024). In this model, principals must have digital literacy and social empathy in order to facilitate innovation, not just enforce rules (Syafrial, 2023). In conclusion, transformational leadership in the digital era is no longer centered on structural power, but rather on influence and the ability to build trust in more equal and participatory relationships (Az-Zahra et al., 2024).

The implementation of transformational leadership in the context of digital schools has also changed the relationship between teachers and students from being hierarchical to being more equal and dialogical (Setiyadi et al., 2025). Teachers are no longer positioned as the only authoritative source of knowledge, but rather as learning facilitators who help students discover and shape their own knowledge (Al et al., 2025). This happens because the digital approach encourages the use of interactive learning media that activates the role of students directly (Ariani et al., 2023). For example, in project-based classes, students can choose themes, design methods, and present their findings in digital forms such as videos or podcasts, while the teacher acts as a mentor. Evidence from practices in digital schools shows that this relationship increases students' self-confidence and strengthens their critical thinking skills (Puspitasari, 2024). However, for some teachers, especially those accustomed to conventional instructional models, this change is challenging because it requires them to relinquish some control of the classroom (Uno, 2023). In conclusion, transformational leadership encourages the formation of a more dialogic and democratic learning ecosystem, although this requires significant changes in the mindset of educators (Saragih, 2025).

One of the most striking impacts of transformational leadership in digital schools is the erosion of conventional disciplinary values (Annas & Mas, 2022). Leadership that emphasizes freedom of expression, flexibility of time, and a student-centered learning approach often clashes with old educational norms that prioritize order, punctuality, and adherence to structure (Fitria, 2024). In some cases, digital schools have eliminated manual attendance systems, replacing them with flexible automatic attendance tracking, or eliminated face-to-face punishments for minor violations in favor of a restorative approach. This has raised concerns among parents and senior teachers who see that the boundaries of authority are increasingly blurred. They believe that the freedom offered could open up gaps for ethical decline and weaken students' sense of responsibility. However, the transformational approach actually prioritizes intrinsic awareness over external coercion (Rohaeni, 2023). In conclusion, transformational leadership does shake up traditional values such as discipline, but offers a new, more contextual understanding of balanced responsibility and freedom (Ikhwan & Aan, 2025).

In its implementation, transformational leadership in digital schools also faces major challenges in the form of inequality in access to technology that creates new forms of social injustice (Azizah et al., 2025). Although principals have implemented innovative strategies and provided digital training to teachers, in reality not all students can access digital platforms with the same quality (Kasmawati et al., 2025). Differences in family economy cause some students to have difficulty participating in online learning optimally due to limited devices or internet connections. Data from several regions show a gap in engagement in digital classes, where students from low-income families show lower levels of participation and achievement (Sonia & Sassi, 2024). This inequality has the potential to widen the social gap in the world of education if it is not addressed with an equalization strategy by school leaders. Transformational leadership should be inclusive and adaptive to the social realities of students (Harnoto et al., 2025). In conclusion, innovation in digital leadership will not be fully successful without being balanced with efforts to ensure fair access, so that the transformation that occurs truly touches all levels of students (Darmayasa et al., 2025).

Although often viewed as a disruptive force, transformational leadership in digital schools can also be a means to reinterpret and revive traditional values in a more contextual form (Herlambang, 2021). Values such as mutual cooperation, social responsibility, and respect for local culture can still be realized in a digital format that is relevant to the current generation (Wulandari et al., 2024). Principals who have a transformational vision are able to encourage digital activities that promote traditional

values through creative approaches, such as online collaborative projects, educational content based on local culture, or virtual social activities (Solehudin, 2022). In one school, students were involved in making documentary videos about regional traditions as part of a school assignment, which were then published to the wider community. This kind of activity shows that technology does not have to be the enemy of traditional values, but can be their new medium (Windiyani et al., 2025). In conclusion, transformational leadership that is sensitive to local culture has the potential to be a bridge between old values and new innovations, not as a replacement, but as an extension of meaning in the ever-changing world of education (Jelantik, 2021).

Transformational leadership plays a crucial role in the implementation of digital technology in schools, especially in the context of religious and cultural-based educational institutions (Umami & Wahyudi, 2025). Transformational leaders are able to inspire change, encourage innovation, and build a shared vision while maintaining a balance between technological progress and traditional values (Fitriyana, 2024). They create fundamental changes based on religious values, systems, and culture to enhance creativity and innovation. In the context of elementary schools, transformational leadership is effective in implementing digital transformation while maintaining traditional characteristics (Nashrullah et al., 2025), as demonstrated at SD Antawirya Islamic Javanese School. This approach allows schools to adapt to the digital era while maintaining local values, creating an inclusive and adaptive learning environment to change.

This study offers a novelty by revealing how transformational leadership in digital schools is not only a driving force for technological innovation, but also plays a strategic role in maintaining and revitalizing traditional values in the context of religious and cultural-based educational institutions. Different from previous studies that tend to separate technological modernization and the preservation of local values, this study shows that both aspects can run harmoniously under visionary and transformative leadership. The case study at SD Antawirya Islamic Javanese School shows how the principal is able to combine digital transformation with Islamic and Javanese cultural characters in an integrative manner, creating an adaptive yet contextual leadership model. This approach is an original contribution to the study of educational leadership because it shows that digital transformation does not have to be a threat to authority and traditional values, but can be a means to strengthen local identity in the global educational landscape. Thus, this study broadens the understanding of the role of educational leaders in the digital era by emphasizing the importance of integrating innovation and local wisdom in building future schools.

Research on transformational leadership in digital schools is very urgent to be carried out considering the increasingly rapid flow of digitalization in the world of education which is often not balanced with an awareness of the importance of preserving traditional values (Ristanti, 2023). On the one hand, digitalization demands innovation in governance and learning processes, while on the other hand, many schools (especially those based on religion and culture) experience a dilemma in maintaining their local identity amidst technological changes (Hidayat & Hasmiza, 2025). Transformational leadership emerges as a strategic approach that is able to bridge the two poles by creating innovations that do not sacrifice the noble values that have long been the basis of education (Ismail & Pd, 2024). This study is important because there has not been much research that specifically explores the role of transformational leaders in managing digital schools that remain rooted in local wisdom. Moreover, this phenomenon is increasingly relevant amidst the challenges of globalization and technological disruption that can erode the identity of educational institutions if not handled wisely. Therefore, this research is worthy of being conducted as a contribution to the development of an educational leadership model that is adaptive to the progress of the times, but remains contextual with the cultural and spiritual values of the local community.

2. METHOD

The selection of the research location at SMA Darussalam Blokagung is considered very relevant to the focus of the study on transformational leadership in digital schools that are confronted with traditional values. As an Islamic boarding school-based educational institution with strong Islamic values and local culture, SMA Darussalam faces unique challenges in integrating digital technology into the learning system without eliminating its religious and traditional identity (Ardiansyah & Basuki, 2023). This school is a representative example of how leadership can play a key role in navigating change, inspiring innovation, and maintaining a balance between modernization and preserving noble values that have been rooted in the culture of the institution.

The use of a qualitative approach with a case study type in the study entitled "Transformational Leadership in Digital Schools: Innovation or Threat to Traditional Values?" is very relevant because it allows researchers to explore in depth the dynamics of leadership in a complex social and cultural context. The qualitative approach provides space to understand the meaning, experiences, and perceptions of educational actors (such as principals, teachers, and students) towards the digital transformation process that takes place in schools based on traditional values (Sahra et al., 2025). The case study type was chosen because the focus of the research is on one institution, namely SMA Darussalam Blokagung, which has unique characteristics as a school based on local religion and culture. Through case studies, researchers can observe how transformational leadership is carried out concretely, how technology is applied, and how traditional values are negotiated in everyday practice. The relevance of this method lies in its ability to explore the context thoroughly and produce in-depth understanding, which cannot be achieved through quantitative approaches or large-scale surveys (Rivaldi & Yulifari, 2025).

In the study entitled "Transformational Leadership in Digital Schools: Innovation or Threat to Traditional Values?", two types of data sources were used, namely primary data and secondary data, to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth picture. Primary data was obtained through direct observation in the school environment, in-depth interviews with the principal, teachers, and students at SMA Darussalam Blokagung, and documentation of digital activities taking place at the school. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from various scientific literature, school policy documents, curriculum archives, and other written sources that support an understanding of the cultural context and digitalization of education at the school. The use of these two types of data aims to enrich the analysis, compare field perspectives with relevant theories, and ensure the validity and depth of the findings. This data triangulation approach is considered important so that the research results are not only descriptive, but also interpretative and contextual (Niam et al., 2024).

The following is a table of informants for this study, which includes the principal, teachers, and students at SMA Darussalam Blokagung:

Table 1. Informant Data

No	Informant Criteria	Informant Code	Gender	Amount
1	Headmaster	H	Male	1
2	Senior teacher	T1, T2	Male, Female	2
3	Young digital teacher	T3, T4	Male, Female	2
4	Digital active students	S1, S2	Male, Female	2
5	Conservative students	S3, S4	Male, Female	2
Total				9

The informants in this study consisted of nine people, including the principal, four teachers, and four students of SMA Darussalam Blokagung. The informants were selected based on the variety of roles and views on the digitalization of education and the preservation of traditional values. The principal was selected because of his role as the main policy maker in the implementation of digital transformation. Senior teachers and young teachers represent different generations in responding to transformational leadership and technology (Jelantik, 2021). Meanwhile, students were selected to describe the direct experiences of the digital generation, both those who are active in utilizing technology and those who still maintain traditional learning approaches (Kamali & Sugiyanto, 2024). This composition of informants provides depth of perspective and allows for data triangulation in the analysis.

In the study entitled "Transformational Leadership in Digital Schools: Innovation or Threat to Traditional Values?", several complementary data collection techniques were used to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The main technique used was in-depth interviews, conducted with principals, teachers, and students to explore perceptions, experiences, and social dynamics related to transformational leadership and the integration of digital technology in traditional value-based schools. In addition, participant observation was conducted directly in the school environment to examine leadership practices, digital interactions, and forms of adaptation to changes that occurred. Documentation studies were used to trace archives of relevant school policies, curricula, and digitalization programs. In addition, audio analysis was conducted on the results of interview recordings and digital school activities to capture the nuances of communication and verbal expressions that emerged during the transformation process. The combination of these four techniques was chosen

to produce rich and contextual data, and to ensure the validity of the findings through a systematic triangulation approach (Saputra, 2025).

This study uses the Miles and Huberman model data analysis technique which includes three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024). Data reduction is carried out by sorting important data from interviews, observations, documentation, and audio recordings to focus on themes that are relevant to transformational leadership in digital schools. Furthermore, the data is presented in the form of matrices, narratives, and patterns of relationships between components that facilitate interpretation (Hamali et al., 2023). Drawing conclusions is done in stages and continuously verified to remain consistent with the context. To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses triangulation techniques that include source triangulation, namely comparing information from the principal, teachers, and students; method triangulation, namely comparing data from interviews, observations, documentation, and audio; and observer triangulation, namely involving more than one researcher or observer to ensure the objectivity of data interpretation. This approach ensures that the research results are valid, in-depth, and scientifically accountable (Susanto & Jailani, 2023)

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Transformational leadership has been shown to be a major driving force in bringing digital innovation to schools without sacrificing traditional values (Fathiyyah & Khusna, 2024). Principals who implement this leadership style demonstrate the ability to inspire teachers and students to not only accept technological change but also to interpret digitalization as part of strengthening the quality of learning. At SMA Darussalam Blokagung, the principal encourages technology integration through teacher training, updating the digital curriculum, and providing an online learning platform that is tailored to Islamic principles and local culture. Evidence from interviews with teachers and students shows that digitalization actually strengthens the collaborative spirit and facilitates the development of local content based on Islamic boarding school values. The principal also provides an example in the use of technology and always emphasizes that digitalization is not an end in itself, but a tool to achieve more meaningful learning. These findings show that transformational leadership not only encourages innovation but also functions as a bridge connecting modernization with the preservation of noble values (Suhendi, 2023). Therefore, digitalization under transformative leadership can be a creative space that maintains the cultural roots and spirituality of education (Lubis & Harahap, 2025). The following are the results of our interview with the principal of SMA Darussalam Blokagung regarding this matter.

"We realize that digital transformation is something that cannot be avoided, but the most important thing is how we direct the process so that it remains in accordance with the values of the Islamic boarding school that we adhere to. I always tell teachers that technology is not a substitute for values, but rather a means to strengthen character education. Therefore, we have developed a digital curriculum that still refers to Islamic principles and local culture. I am also directly involved in technology training so that teachers and students feel that this is a joint movement, not just instructions from above."

One of the students at SMA Darussalam Blokagung was also very enthusiastic when learning started using digital media.

"I was happy when learning started using a lot of digital media, especially since we were given the freedom to create our own content. But what was interesting was that we were still asked to insert Islamic boarding school values such as politeness, honesty, and cooperation. So even though we were learning using a laptop or cellphone, it felt like we were still learning in an Islamic boarding school environment. The principal also often reminded us that technology is good if it is used for good."

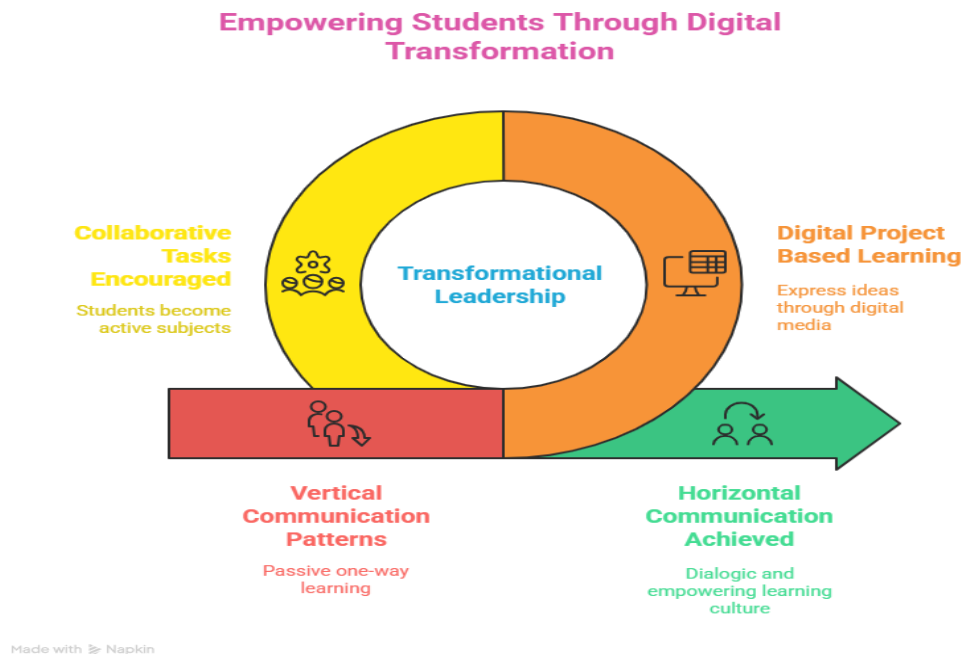
The following is a table containing standards, targets, and digital transformation in culture and religion-based schools:

Table 2. Standards, Targets, and Digital Transformation

Standard	Aspect (Traditional Condition)	Target (Ideal Condition in the Digital Era)	Digital Transformation in Schools Based on Culture and Religion
The Role of Teachers	Teachers as the center of knowledge and sole authority in the classroom.	Teachers as facilitators and learning guides, supporting student independence.	Teachers began to adopt new roles after attending digital training, guided by the principal with a collaborative leadership style.
Student Access to Information	Limited to textbooks and materials provided by teachers.	Students can access learning resources independently through digital technology.	Teachers no longer feel challenged, but are actively involved in directing students to filter information according to local religious and cultural values.
Teachers' Attitudes Towards Technology	Skeptical, worried that technology will displace their authority.	Open to innovation and using technology to enhance learning.	Teachers try to create interactive materials and manage hybrid classes after getting full support from the principal.
Role of the Principal	Administrative manager, not too involved in teacher capacity development.	Visionary leader who directs transformation and builds teacher capacity through training and dialogue.	The principal provides space for discussion, training, and accompanies teachers so that they do not feel threatened, but instead develop in facing digitalization.
Cultural and Religious Values in the Classroom	Maintained through conventional methods such as lectures and memorization.	Integrated into digital learning to remain relevant to the times.	The values of the Islamic boarding school are maintained even though the learning media is digital, through leadership guidance that emphasizes a balance between innovation and preserving traditional values.

The table illustrates the significant transformations that have occurred in educational practices in cultural and religious schools as a result of transformational leadership in the digital era. These changes are not merely technical, but also touch on fundamental aspects such as the role of teachers, how students access information, and the integration of traditional values in the learning process. Initially, teachers tended to be the only source of knowledge and felt threatened by the presence of technology. However, through a collaborative and visionary leadership approach, they began to transform into facilitators who were more adaptive to the needs of the times (Nugraha et al., 2025). The principal plays an important role in directing these changes, not only as a policy maker, but also as an active companion in the learning process of teachers and students.

Figure 1. Empowering Students Through Digital Transformation



The figure above illustrates how transformational leadership is at the center of efforts to empower students through digital transformation in learning. In this model, transformational leadership not only encourages the use of technology but also creates a collaborative, participatory, and value-based learning climate (Yulianeu, 2023). The learning process is transformed from a passive vertical communication pattern where students are only recipients of information to a dialogical and empowering horizontal communication pattern (HARUN, 2023). This allows a culture of discussion, mutual respect for ideas, and collaboration to develop in the digital classroom. On the other hand, this leadership also encourages the implementation of collaborative tasks that make students active subjects, not just objects of learning. With digital project-based learning, students are given space to express their creative ideas through digital media that are relevant to their current world (Abdurahman et al., 2024). This entire process shows that digital transformation guided by transformational leadership not only improves the quality of learning technically but also builds an educational ecosystem that values participation, creativity, and collaboration, while maintaining the deep meaning of education itself (Terminanto et al., 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and analysis above, it can be concluded that transformational leadership has a central role in the process of digitalization of education that remains rooted in traditional values. This leadership style has been proven to be able to create a learning environment that is not only responsive to technological developments but also maintains and strengthens the cultural and religious character of students (Lupiah et al., 2025). The principal as an agent of change shows the ability to inspire, guide, and set an example in the digital adaptation process, especially in the context of religious-based schools (Dewi et al., 2023) such as SMA Darussalam Blokagung. Teachers who were initially passive towards technology became more enthusiastic after receiving structural and moral support, while students were encouraged to become active subjects through collaborative tasks and digital project-based learning. This transformation is not instantaneous, but is the result of an open and ongoing horizontal communication process, in which all elements of the school are involved equally. Digitalization in this context is not a threat to traditional values, but rather a strategic medium to preserve them in a new form that is relevant to the times (Zuhra et

al., 2024). Thus, it can be concluded that transformational leadership is the key to success in directing inclusive, valuable, and sustainable digital transformation (Prabawa & Kuswinarno, 2024).

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