

The Transformational Leadership of School Principals in Improving the Quality of Vocational High School Graduates in South Aceh

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ABSTRACT

The transformational leadership of vocational high school (SMK) principals must play a role in improving the quality of education so that students are ready to compete in the current job market and industrial world. This research aims to: 1) Identify transformational leadership programs; 2) Examine the implementation of transformational leadership through the realization of vision and mission; 3) Understand the principal's ability to provide encouragement and motivation; 4) Explore the principal's creative and inspiring ideas in efforts to improve the quality of graduates.

The research method used is qualitative. The data sources consist of school principals, teachers, educators, and educational staff. Data collection techniques include interviews, observations, and documentation. Data analysis is conducted through data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions.

The research results show that: 1) The transformational leadership programs of the school principals include: Idealized influence, where the principal involves all elements in decision-making. Inspirational motivation, where the principal serves as a role model for the school community. Intellectual stimulation, where the principal acts as the main driver in every school development change. Individualized consideration, where the principal pays attention to individual staff members. 2) The implementation of transformational leadership by the school principals is evident in their vision and mission, based on data on the number of graduates accepted in the workforce and industry, as well as those who work independently in their respective fields of expertise. 3) The principal's ability is demonstrated through the encouragement and motivation provided to teachers and staff through various methods, including training or rewards. 4) The principal's ideas and efforts to improve quality include adding adequate infrastructure, incorporating teaching factories into learning, providing additional training for students, establishing collaborations with national-scale companies, forming alumni communities, and offering student industrial work practice.

Keywords: Transformational leadership; Vocational high school principals; Quality of education; Job market; Vision and mission; Encouragement and motivation; Creative and inspiring ideas; Qualitative research; Data collection techniques; Implementation and outcomes.

1. Introduction

The importance of instructional leadership in Indonesia is outlined in the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 6 of 2018, which highlights the key responsibilities of school principals in managing and improving school quality. The regulation mandates principals to foster educational improvement through supervision and guidance to enhance learning quality (Howell, 2022).

To promote school advancement, provincial governments appoint teachers to lead vocational high schools (SMK) based on qualifications set by the government. Requirements include a minimum of a bachelor's degree (S-1) or Diploma IV (D-IV), a teaching certificate, a "Good" performance rating for the last two years, at least six years of teaching experience, and being physically and mentally fit, free from drug abuse, and without disciplinary actions or criminal convictions. Additionally, principals must possess competencies in management, entrepreneurship, supervision, and social skills to plan, implement, and evaluate school activities to achieve the school's vision and mission. These competencies are critical to the success of educational leadership.

Usman (2021) emphasizes that school principals should act as promoters of their school's success, maximizing their roles to improve education quality. Vocational high schools are complex organizations that require leaders with integrity, high commitment, and the ability to manage resources and achieve educational goals effectively.

The principal's leadership style significantly impacts teacher performance, ultimately improving student outcomes and competitiveness in the job market.

Transformational leadership is characterized by a leader's ability to inspire and motivate staff, fostering a positive work culture, building strong relationships, and enhancing teacher performance. Effective leadership can boost teacher confidence in school administration, strengthen school relationships, and cultivate loyalty and commitment among staff, which ultimately benefits student learning outcomes. Transformational leaders focus on individual and team development, driving continuous improvement, innovation, and growth in schools.

In South Aceh, there are 12 vocational high schools, each with different areas of expertise based on local needs. However, some SMK programs are not aligned with local industry demands, such as software engineering and multimedia, which lack local industry partners.

Initial observations in several SMKs in South Aceh reveal several challenges: 1) Principals often arrive late, failing to set a good example; 2) Many delegate tasks without taking responsibility themselves; and 3) Some principals conduct only superficial academic supervision, or none at all. These issues underscore the need for more effective transformational leadership.

Previous research and practical experience show that transformational leadership in schools creates a more productive learning environment, motivated students, and better academic outcomes. However, developing transformational leadership requires deep understanding and strong commitment. This thesis aims to examine the presence and impact of transformational leadership in improving graduate quality at vocational high schools in South Aceh.

1.1. Problem Statement

How does the transformational leadership of school principals improve the quality of vocational high school graduates in South Aceh?

1.2. Research Objectives

- 1) Identify the transformational leadership programs of school principals and their impact on the quality of vocational high school graduates in South Aceh.
- 2) Analyze the implementation of school principals' vision and mission in improving graduate quality.
- 3) Assess principals' ability to motivate and encourage staff in enhancing graduate outcomes.
- 4) Explore principals' creative ideas and efforts to inspire and improve graduate quality.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative research method, which is applied to investigate objects in their natural settings. Sugiyono (2020) explains that qualitative research emphasizes understanding meaning rather than generalization.

Data is collected through triangulation, a combination of various techniques such as interviews, observations, and documentation. Ibrahim (2018) adds that the qualitative approach aims to explore data in depth and produce rich descriptions.

The approach used in this research is a phenomenological approach, which examines the phenomenon of transformational leadership of school principals in improving the quality of graduates in vocational schools (SMK) in South Aceh. In addition to phenomenology, pedagogical, sociological, and vocational skills approaches are also employed, in line with the context of education and training in vocational schools.

2.2. Research Subjects

The research subjects include school principals, teachers, and educators from three vocational schools in South Aceh Regency, namely SMKN Labuhanhaji, SMKN Sawang, and SMKN Kluet Timur. The selection of informants was conducted using purposive sampling, selecting informants based on specific criteria to obtain data relevant to the research objectives.

2.3. Data Collection Techniques

Data in this study was collected using four main techniques:

1. Participant Observation: The researcher directly engaged with the research subjects and recorded observed behaviors in detail.
2. Interviews: This technique was used to gather in-depth information from school principals, teachers, and educators through semi-structured questions.
3. Documentation: Data collection through related documents, such as school profiles and tracer studies relevant to the research.
4. Questionnaires: This instrument was used to collect data from respondents through a series of written questions.

2.4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted interactively following the model of Miles and Huberman, which includes:

1. Data Collection: Data was gathered in large quantities over a period of time through observation, interviews, and documentation.
2. Data Reduction: Collected data was summarized and focused on relevant information.
3. Data Display: The summarized data was then presented in a narrative form.
4. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: After data analysis, the researcher drew conclusions to generate new findings.

2.5. Research Instruments

The main instrument in this study is the researcher, who acts as an observer, interviewer, data collector, and report writer. Additionally, interview, observation, and documentation guidelines were developed based on the research objectives to produce valid and reliable data.

3. Results and Discussion

The research findings in this section are based on fieldwork conducted at three state vocational schools, representing different regions, school sizes, and leadership styles observed during the study. The collected data was validated through a credibility test to ensure its accuracy. These findings provide a concrete overview, offering a description of the school principals' leadership in improving the quality of graduates, both in terms of employability and those continuing to university. Before discussing the results, a general overview of vocational schools in South Aceh will be provided.

3.1. Overview of Vocational Schools in South Aceh

a. SMKN 1 Labuhanhaji

Located in Padang Bakau, Labuhanhaji, this school has 319 students across 17 classes with four areas of expertise: Agribusiness, Nautical Fishing, Automotive, and Computer Network Engineering. Established in 2002, it has 73 educators and is equipped with workshops to support its programs, making it competitive in the job market.

b. SMKN 1 Sawang

In Meuligo, Sawang, with 69 students and two programs: Multimedia and Business Marketing. Founded in 2004, the school added Multimedia in 2009. It has 45 educators and 6 classes. The school is well-equipped with practical rooms for both programs.

c. SMKN 1 Kluet Timur

Located in Sapik, Kluet Timur, 4 km from the main provincial road, this school offers Agribusiness (since 2010) and Software Engineering (since 2021). With 36 students, it faces low enrollment due to limited industry and minimal workshop equipment. It has 36 staff and basic tools for student training.

3.2. School Principals' Transformational Leadership and Graduate Quality

Leadership is key to guiding and structuring activities within schools. As described by Gary (2020) and Usman (2023), principals play a vital role in carrying out educational programs and influencing school success. According to Prasetya (2024), transformational leadership positively impacts school effectiveness by fostering cooperation, innovation, and professional learning communities.

In all three schools, principals involve teachers, staff, and stakeholders in decision-making. For example, at SMKN 1 Labuhanhaji, a Quality Development Team, including school committees and parents, is involved in shaping school policies. Similarly, SMKN 1 Sawang uses collective decision-making, though their vision and mission are still based on the former principal's directives. SMKN 1 Kluet Timur also practices collective decision-making, having revised its vision and mission to align with current goals.

Transformational leadership, characterized by idealized influence, is crucial for schools to adapt and thrive. Principals act as role models, earning respect and loyalty, leading to better alignment with contemporary educational needs.

3.3. The Implementation of Transformational Leadership by the Principal in Improving the Quality of Graduates

The transformational leadership of a principal plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of graduates. One of its main components is providing motivation and inspiration to teachers and staff. The principal not only offers material support but also fosters enthusiasm through role modeling, discipline, and openness. For instance, **Participant A** stated that the motivation provided by the principal can drive the self-development of teachers and staff, which ultimately positively impacts the school's progress and the quality of its graduates.

Based on interviews with **Participant B**, it is evident that the principal employs an inclusive motivational pattern by involving teachers and educational staff in decision-making processes. However, the participant also highlighted the tendency of the principal to be selective in providing motivation, which can reduce the effectiveness of transformation within the school.

Meanwhile, **Participant C** emphasized the importance of a persuasive and humanistic approach in motivating underperforming teachers, as well as the use of training to enhance competencies, especially in the field of technology. This approach strengthens the relationship between the principal and teachers, creating a collaborative and supportive working atmosphere.

Overall, the interviews with participants revealed that role modeling, motivation, and collaboration are essential elements of the principal's transformational leadership. The application of this leadership strategy can inspire teachers and staff to continuously grow and deliver better outcomes for students.

3.4. The Principal's Ability to Provide Encouragement and Motivation to Improve the Quality of Graduates

An effective principal is able to give individual attention to teachers and staff through a transformational leadership approach. **Participant A** stated that the principal always strives to meet the needs of teachers and educational staff in the teaching and learning process, even though it is often hampered by budget constraints. By discussing these needs openly, the principal creates an environment where teachers feel heard and supported.

The principal must also be able to seek creative solutions in utilizing available resources within the school. **Participant B** noted that the principal tries to improve teachers' competencies through training, although budget challenges often pose significant obstacles. For example, technology training was conducted to prepare teachers for the needs of modern education.

However, in some cases, there are issues with the utilization of the provided facilities. Observations at the school revealed that some facilities were not used optimally, such as a printer that was damaged due to lack of maintenance or technical skills.

The principal must also ensure that government assistance is managed optimally. In an interview with relevant officials, it was revealed that schools with fewer than 60 students often do not qualify for government equipment assistance, which forces the principal to seek alternative solutions to meet the school's needs.

Overall, good leadership involves the ability to listen, provide appropriate motivation, and seek creative solutions in the face of limited resources. By giving sincere attention to individuals and empowering teachers and staff, the principal can improve the quality of graduates and create a conducive learning environment.

3.5. Principal's Ideas and Innovations to Improve the Quality of Graduates at Vocational Schools in South Aceh

A transformational leader must introduce new ideas, offer creative solutions to staff issues, and motivate them to explore new approaches in achieving the organization's mission. Principals and education stakeholders must adapt to changes in both the curriculum and educational environment, fostering intellectual stimulation for themselves, teachers, and other staff. A principal should encourage teachers and staff to think creatively and innovate in line with these changes.

Interviews with three vocational school principals in South Aceh revealed the following:

Participant A: "We strive to upgrade both human resources and equipment in line with modern technology. Teachers must use technology in their teaching, and we monitor lessons through digital tools like CCTV. Digital transformation is a priority, and we've introduced simulators to create realistic learning environments."

This demonstrates the principal's effort to update school systems and tools. Upgrading equipment also forces teachers to develop new skills, aligning technological advancements with human resource improvement. Regular upskilling and reskilling programs are held, with teachers encouraged to use digital platforms such as "Merdeka Mengajar" for independent learning.

Participant B: "Technology has advanced, and teachers must be ready. Using smartphones or laptops is essential." Similarly, SMKN 1 Sawang requires teachers and administrative staff to use digital devices, fostering tech-savvy educators. A "guru penggerak" (motivator teacher) program is implemented to encourage knowledge sharing among teachers.

Participant C: "Learning is now digital. I encourage teachers to attend both online and offline training. I personally participate to set an example and offer support as needed, given my experience as a former operator."

This principal has held multiple in-house training sessions on digital learning, demonstrating intellectual stimulation. Teachers trust in the importance of technology and feel empowered to embrace it.

In summary, these principals recognize the importance of technology in education and prioritize maintaining strong relationships with teachers and staff to ensure smooth digital integration in their schools.

3.6. Discussion

3.6.1. Transformational Leadership Program

According to Bass (Armansyah, 2022:25), the dimensions of transformational leadership consist of four components known as the "4I" concept, which serve as indicators of transformational leadership types:

a. Idealized Influence: This behavior generates respect and trust from those being led. It involves shared risk, prioritizing the needs of others over personal ones, and demonstrating moral and ethical behavior.

Indicators:

- 1) Leaders influence subordinates through their abilities.
- 2) Leaders act as role models for subordinates.
- 3) Show confidence in followers.
- 4) Instill pride in subordinates.
- 5) Encourage work according to standards.

In three vocational schools researched, the transformational leadership program demonstrated all indicators except for SMKN 1 Sawang, where the second indicator was weak. Four out of six respondents mentioned the principal couldn't be a role model due to frequent tardiness.

b. Inspirational Motivation: Reflected in behavior that provides challenges and meaning to work, including articulating clear expectations and demonstrating commitment to organizational goals.

Indicators:

- 1) Communicate the school's vision to subordinates.
- 2) Communicate the school's mission to subordinates.
- 3) Explain how to achieve the school's vision.
- 4) Explain how to achieve the school's mission.
- 5) Leader's behavior serves as an inspiration to subordinates.

At SMKN 1 Sawang, the principal still uses the previous principal's vision and mission, impacting the graduates' performance in relevant industries. SMKN 1 Kluet Timur demonstrated leadership but lacked equipment, leading graduates to work outside their field of expertise.

c. Intellectual Stimulation: Leaders increase awareness of issues among followers and encourage new perspectives in problem-solving, promoting creativity and innovation.

Indicators:

- 1) Leaders raise subordinates' awareness in solving problems.
- 2) Encourage new perspectives in problem-solving.
- 3) Make rational decisions.
- 4) Involve subordinates in discussions to solve problems.
- 5) Accept suggestions from subordinates.

Vocational school principals have shown rational decision-making and encouraged discussions to resolve problems.

d. Individualized Consideration: Leaders listen attentively and provide special attention to the needs and achievements of subordinates.

Indicators:

- 1) Leaders support subordinates.
- 2) Provide encouragement to subordinates.
- 3) Exchange work experiences with subordinates.
- 4) Verbally praise subordinates' performance.

Vocational school principals in Aceh Selatan provided full support for the personal and professional development of subordinates.

3.6.2. Implementation of Transformational Leadership

In implementing transformational leadership, principals employ strategies to create positive change and improve education quality. The school's tracer studies indicated an increase in graduates' employment in 2023 compared to 2022. Key aspects of implementation include:

- 1) Establishing a clear, inspiring vision.
- 2) Building trust and respect among staff, ensuring integrity, consistency, and transparency in decision-making.
- 3) Empowering staff to make decisions, supporting professional development through training.
- 4) Encouraging intellectual stimulation for creativity and innovation.

The presence of industries aligned with vocational skills enhances the quality of graduates. These industries act as catalysts in designing relevant curricula. Training students in other fields serves as an alternative when relevant industries are unavailable.

3.6.3. Criteria of Transformational Leadership

According to (Danim, 2016:9), transformational leadership has four dominant characteristics:

- 1) Sensitivity to organizational development.
- 2) Developing a shared vision among the community.
- 3) Developing school culture.
- 4) Restructuring efforts.

The principals of vocational schools in Aceh Selatan possess these traits, but the challenge lies in utilizing them effectively to succeed as transformational leaders.

3.6.4. Ideas and Initiatives for Improving Graduate Quality

According to (Khatimah, 2023:41), a principal not only serves as a leader but also as an educator, manager, administrator, supervisor, innovator, and motivator. This comprehensive role is crucial for decision-making and policy implementation.

Vocational education aims to develop skilled human resources, preparing graduates to meet the needs of industries. A major challenge is aligning the curriculum with industrial demands, ensuring students receive practical training aligned with market needs. However, only one school, SMKN 1 Labuhanhaji, has aligned its curriculum with industry requirements.

4. Conclusion

Based on research conducted through observation, interviews, and data analysis at vocational schools in Aceh Selatan regarding the transformational leadership of school principals in improving graduate quality, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. **Transformational Leadership Program:** The principal involves all elements in decision-making (Idealized Influence), serves as a role model for the school community (Inspirational Motivation), drives change and school development (Intellectual Stimulation), and gives attention to individual subordinates (Individualized Consideration).
2. **Implementation of Transformational Leadership:** The principal's leadership, reflected in their vision and mission, has resulted in graduates securing jobs in their fields or becoming self-employed, showing significant progress in helping students enter the workforce.
3. **Principal's Capabilities:** The principal motivates and supports teachers and staff through training and rewards. They actively seek alternatives to improve teacher and student quality through independent training and involvement in learning communities (MGMP).
4. **Ideas for Improvement:** The principal focuses on enhancing facilities, adopting a teaching factory model, providing additional student training, collaborating with national-scale companies, creating alumni networks, and organizing student internships.

Based on the above conclusions, several recommendations can be given, among others:

1. Strengthen Transformational Leadership Programs:

Engage all school stakeholders in decision-making to create a collaborative environment where everyone feels valued. Enhance the principal's role as an inspirational leader actively participating in school development initiatives, and provide personalized support to staff members to address their unique needs and professional growth.

2. Improve Leadership Implementation:

Align the principal's vision and mission with measurable outcomes for student success. Develop strategies to increase the employability of graduates, ensuring they secure jobs in their fields or become self-employed. Regularly monitor and evaluate the principal's leadership impact on student and staff performance to identify areas for improvement.

3. Enhance Professional Development:

Offer more training opportunities and reward programs for teachers and staff to motivate and support their career advancement. Promote participation in learning communities and independent training initiatives, and implement mentorship programs to guide teachers and staff in achieving their professional goals.

4. Develop Infrastructure and Partnerships:

Invest in upgrading school facilities to create a conducive learning environment. Integrate teaching factory models into the curriculum to provide practical, hands-on learning opportunities for students. Establish partnerships with national and international companies for student internships and job placements, and build strong alumni networks to support current students and foster a sense of community.

Declarations

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

Consent for publication

The authors declare that they consented to the publication of this study.

Authors' contributions

All the authors took part in literature review, analysis, and manuscript writing equally.

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