Transformational Leadership and Teacher Performance Enhancement in the Merdeka Curriculum Context

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the implementation of transformational leadership among school principals in enhancing teacher performance within the context of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum). A qualitative approach with a comparative case study design was employed, involving two senior high schools in West Bandung Regency: SMAN 1 Padalarang, a National Adiwiyata School, and SMAN 1 Lembang, one of the first-generation Sekolah Penggerak (Driving Schools). Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model with source triangulation and member checking to ensure validity. The findings reveal that principals demonstrating transformational leadership successfully motivate teachers to innovate, strengthen collaboration, and improve teaching performance. The four dimensions of transformational leadership idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration contributed significantly to fostering teacher performance and building a school culture adaptive to the demands of the Kurikulum Merdeka. The novelty of this study lies in its contextual analysis of how transformational leadership principles are adapted and applied in schools with distinct characteristics. The findings underscore that the success of the Kurikulum Merdeka implementation largely depends on the principal's ability to translate transformational values into inspirational, collaborative, and empowering leadership practices.

Keywords: transformational leadership, teacher performance, *Kurikulum Merdeka*, comparative case study, school principal.

1   Introduction

1.1   Background

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia marks a fundamental transformation in the national education system, emphasizing innovative learning and improved educational quality. This curriculum is designed to develop excellent human resources through a flexible approach centered on students' individual needs [1], [2]. The transformation not only focuses on academic achievement but also prioritizes character development as the foundation for shaping individuals with integrity and competitiveness [3], [4].

Character education within the Merdeka Curriculum is integrated through adaptive learning strategies that promote moral, spiritual, and civic values. This integration aims to address the current educational challenges, especially within the context of Islamic education, which seeks a balance between intellectual intelligence and moral wisdom [5], [6]. Therefore, the reinforcement of these values becomes an integral part of achieving the national education vision to nurture a generation that is not only intellectually capable but also morally grounded and socially responsible [7], [8].

Several studies indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Sekolah Penggerak (pilot schools) has had a positive impact on both teacher and student engagement in the learning process, indirectly contributing to the development of competent and creative human resources [9]. The curriculum provides teachers with the autonomy to design learning methods tailored to students' needs while reinforcing character education based on Pancasila values [10]. However, its implementation still faces challenges, particularly regarding teachers' readiness and schools' adaptability to curricular changes [11]. Research highlights the importance of institutional support, continuous professional development, and visionary leadership to ensure the effective realization of the curriculum's objectives [12].

Within this context, school principals play a strategic role as agents of change who determine the success of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Principals must function not only as administrators but also as leaders who can inspire, motivate, and empower teachers to innovate in their instructional practices [9], [13]. One leadership model that aligns with the demands of this transformation is transformational leadership, which enhances teachers' motivation and commitment in adopting new, flexible, and creative teaching approaches [14].

Transformational leadership is characterized by four main dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration [15], [16]. Through these dimensions, school principals can foster a collaborative culture, facilitate teacher creativity, and promote innovation in learning processes [17], [18]. This leadership style has been shown to play an essential role in building a positive work environment and improving teachers' performance quality [19], [20].

Numerous studies have confirmed that transformational leadership has a significant positive relationship with teachers' motivation and [21]. Dimensions such as charisma and intellectual stimulation, for instance, enhance teachers' creativity and critical thinking key competencies for 21st-century education [22]. Beyond increasing motivation,

transformational leadership also directly contributes to improved student learning outcomes, as teachers become more collaborative, innovative, and reflective in their practices [23], [24]. Hence, transformational leadership plays a central role in strengthening the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in enhancing teacher performance and overall educational quality [25].

1.2 Previous Research and Rationale

Several previous studies have shown that transformational leadership plays an essential role in enhancing teacher motivation and performance. Research conducted by Raman et al. (2015) revealed that the core dimensions of transformational leadership charisma, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration encourage teachers to work with greater enthusiasm, demonstrate higher commitment, and actively participate in instructional innovation [26]. Similarly, Yurt (2024) emphasized that intellectual stimulation is crucial in fostering teachers' critical and creative thinking skills, particularly in responding to the dynamic changes of modern education [27]. Moreover, Sari et al. (2025) found that the implementation of transformational leadership not only influences teachers' work motivation but also directly improves students' learning outcomes through increased collaboration and innovation in the learning process [28].

Although these studies affirm the positive impact of transformational leadership, most of them primarily focus on the correlational relationship between leadership style and teacher performance without examining in depth how leadership strategies are implemented in schools with different contexts and characteristics. Previous studies have tended to highlight the influence of leadership on teachers' psychological aspects such as motivation, commitment, and job satisfaction yet have rarely explored the processes of adaptation and contextual application of transformational leadership at the school level. In the context of the continuously evolving educational landscape, especially with the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum), school principals are required to adjust their leadership strategies to remain relevant and effective in supporting teacher performance improvement.

This research gap highlights the need for more contextually grounded studies to explore how school principals adapt transformational leadership principles to meet the challenges of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. A deeper exploration is needed to understand how principals apply the four core dimensions of transformational leadership idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration in motivating teachers and fostering collaborative and innovative learning environments. Such an approach would allow a more realistic and practical understanding of leadership dynamics within the Indonesian educational context.

Building on this rationale, the present study offers novelty by analyzing the practical implementation of transformational leadership through a comparative case study involving two senior high schools with contrasting characteristics. This research does not merely measure the influence of leadership on teacher performance but also explores how principals adapt, innovate, and find solutions in managing educational change and empowering teachers under the Kurikulum Merdeka. The selected research sites are SMAN 1 Padalarang, recognized as a National Adiwiyata School focused on

environmental innovation, and SMAN 1 Lembang, one of the first-generation Sekolah Penggerak (Driving Schools) in West Bandung Regency.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the practices and strategies of transformational leadership implemented by school principals to enhance teacher performance in the era of the Kurikulum Merdeka, while identifying the challenges, solutions, and impacts of these practices on teacher motivation and performance. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of transformational leadership concepts in the Indonesian educational context and provide practical recommendations for principals in managing change, improving teacher competence, and strengthening the sustainable implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka.

2 Method

2.1 Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, conducted in two public senior high schools, namely SMAN 1 Padalarang and SMAN 1 Lembang in West Bandung Regency. A qualitative approach was chosen to enable an in-depth and contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, particularly in analyzing the implementation of transformational leadership by school principals in enhancing teacher performance in the era of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) [29]. The case study design was selected to explore and explain leadership phenomena within their real-life contexts. According to Yin (2018), a case study is particularly suitable when researchers seek to answer "how" and "why" questions and when the boundaries between a phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident [30]. This approach allows the researcher to explore the meaning, strategies, and dynamics of transformational leadership across distinct school contexts environmentally oriented schools and Sekolah Penggerak (Driving Schools) thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of leadership practices in varied educational settings.

2.2 Research Sites and Participants

The research sites were determined through purposive selection, considering institutional characteristics and contextual diversity. SMAN 1 Padalarang is recognized as a National Adiwiyata School known for its environmentally driven innovations, while SMAN 1 Lembang is one of the first-generation Sekolah Penggerak focusing on instructional innovation and character education. These differences provide an opportunity for comparative analysis of how transformational leadership is applied in differing institutional environments. Research participants consisted of principals, vice principals, and teachers, selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance and capacity to provide in-depth information [31]. Principals served as key informants due to their strategic leadership roles, while vice principals and teachers provided supporting perspectives on the practical implementation and perceived impact of transformational leadership on teacher performance.

2.3 Types and Sources of Data

Two types of data were used in this study: primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and field notes, capturing participants' experiences, perspectives, and actions regarding transformational leadership practices. Secondary data were gathered from official school documents such as the School Work Plan (RKS), teacher supervision reports, educational report cards, activity reports, and achievement records. The use of secondary data strengthens the interpretation of primary findings by providing contextual depth and institutional evidence [32].

2.4 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow flexibility in exploring participants' insights while maintaining focus on the research objectives [33]. Participatory observation was used to capture leadership behaviors, interactions between principals and teachers, and organizational dynamics within the school environment [34]. Document analysis complemented these methods by providing textual evidence related to leadership practices and teacher performance enhancement [35]. Employing multiple techniques allowed data triangulation and a more holistic understanding of the research phenomenon.

2.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three concurrent processes: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification [36]. Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data to retain information relevant to the research focus. Data display was conducted through descriptive narratives, matrices, and tables to facilitate the identification of emerging themes and relationships among categories. The final stage, conclusion drawing and verification, entailed interpreting and confirming findings through continuous reflection and cross-checking until data saturation was achieved. Throughout the process, the researcher maintained openness to new insights and conducted iterative comparisons to ensure analytical reliability.

2.6 Data Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of findings, this study adopted the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [37]. Credibility was achieved through source and technique triangulation, comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents to confirm consistency [38]. Member checking was conducted by returning summarized findings to participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Transferability was ensured by providing rich contextual descriptions, enabling readers to determine the applicability of findings

in similar contexts. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail, documenting all methodological steps and analytical decisions to ensure transparency. Lastly, confirmability was upheld by researcher reflexivity, acknowledging potential biases and maintaining objectivity throughout the research process [39].

3 Results

The findings of this study indicate that the principals of SMAN 1 Padalarang and SMAN 1 Lembang have effectively implemented the four dimensions of transformational leadership idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Each school applied these dimensions through distinctive leadership practices tailored to their institutional culture and specific needs.

3.1 Idealized Influence of the Principals

At SMAN 1 Padalarang, the principal demonstrated idealized influence through practical role modeling and a strong sense of discipline. The principal's consistent presence in daily school routines, such as morning ceremonies and *salat Dhuha*, served as a living example of commitment and responsibility. The principal's professional achievements, including recognition as an outstanding school leader, also became a motivational force for teachers to strive for excellence.

In SMAN 1 Lembang, the principal's idealized influence was characterized by moral integrity and symbolic actions. The principal regularly greeted students at the school gate each morning, participated in cleaning activities, and took responsibility when teachers faced challenges. These practices fostered a sense of trust, psychological safety, and a positive school climate grounded in mutual respect and care.

Table 1. Comparison of Idealized Influence Strategies

Comparison Dimension	SMAN 1 Padalarang (Practice-Based Approach)	SMAN 1 Lembang (Integrity-Based Approach)
Main Focus	Role modeling through discipline, engagement, and professional achievement.	Role modeling through moral integrity, empathy, and strong vision.
Source of Influence	Performance credibility from visible actions and achievements.	Character credibility from personal integrity.
Practices	Early presence, participation in all school routines, external recognition.	Greeting students, joining cleaning activities, protecting teachers in difficult situations.

Comparison Dimension	SMAN 1 Padalarang (Practice-Based Approach)	SMAN 1 Lembang (Integrity-Based Approach)
Impact on Teachers	Improved discipline, work ethic, and motivation for achievement.	Enhanced loyalty, psychological safety, and commitment to school values.
Impact on Students	Students are motivated by structured, achievement-oriented teachers.	Students experience a caring, character-based school environment.

3.2 Inspirational Motivation of the Principals

At SMAN 1 Padalarang, inspirational motivation was achieved through a personal approach emphasizing appreciation and tangible support. The principal personally encouraged and praised teachers, provided modern learning facilities such as smartboards and digital examination systems, and organized professional development programs such as *In-House Training (IHT)* and *Teacher Learning Days (HBG)*.

At SMAN 1 Lembang, the principal employed a collective approach built upon shared vision and teamwork. This included morning and afternoon duty rotations, thematic collaborative learning, and regular reflection meetings designed to strengthen unity and a shared sense of purpose among teachers.

Table 2. Comparison of Inspirational Motivation Strategies

Comparison Dimension	SMAN 1 Padalarang (Personal Approach)	SMAN 1 Lembang (Collective Approach)
Main Focus	Individual appreciation, personal support, and resource provision.	Shared vision, collective responsibility, and collaborative culture.
Source of Motivation	Intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy from recognition and encouragement.	Collective efficacy and team-based commitment.
Practices	Direct praise, smartboard facilities, IHT, and Teacher Learning Days.	Joint duty shifts, collaborative thematic learning, reflection meetings.
Impact on Teachers	Enhanced intrinsic motivation and individual creativity.	Improved teamwork, discipline, and collective enthusiasm.
Impact on Students	Students experience more creative and varied learning activities.	Students learn in a structured, collaborative, and visionary environment.

3.3   Intellectual Stimulation of the Principals

At SMAN 1 Padalarang, intellectual stimulation was facilitated through modern facilities and ongoing training programs. The principal encouraged teachers to adopt innovative teaching technologies such as smartboards and the PIJAR digital testing platform and to share best practices through regular *Teacher Learning Days*.

In contrast, SMAN 1 Lembang fostered intellectual stimulation through a systematic culture of data-driven reflection and collaboration. Teachers were guided to analyze student performance data using tools like *Sm1Le Exam* and to design integrative, cross-subject learning projects collaboratively.

Table 3. Comparison of Intellectual Stimulation Strategies

Comparison Dimension	SMAN 1 Padalarang (Practical–Innovative Approach)	SMAN 1 Lembang (Systematic–Reflective Approach)
Main Focus	Encouraging innovation through facilities and practical training.	Building reflective and collaborative culture through data use.
Innovation Trigger	Resource support (Smartboard, PIJAR, IHT, Teacher Learning Days).	Needs analysis based on learning outcome data.
Practices	Paperless digital exams, teacher sharing sessions.	Collective reflection meetings, thematic collaborative projects.
Impact on Teachers	Increased creativity and willingness to experiment with technology.	Enhanced analytical and problem-solving skills.
Impact on Students	Students become familiar with digital learning and technology.	Students develop critical thinking, collaboration, and improved academic results.

3.4   Individualized Consideration of the Principals

At SMAN 1 Padalarang, individualized consideration was reflected in the principal's emotional and personal care for teachers. The principal showed genuine concern for teachers' well-being, offered personal mentoring, and supported their professional growth, including assistance with promotion and career advancement.

At SMAN 1 Lembang, individualized consideration was implemented more systematically through data-based teacher support. The principal used educational reports and

performance evaluations to identify teachers' specific needs and provided targeted in-terventions such as tailored training, technical guidance, and competence-based task assignments.

Table 4. Comparison of Individualized Consideration Strategies

Comparison Dimension	SMAN 1 Padalarang (Personal–Emotional Approach)	SMAN 1 Lembang (Systematic–Data-Driven Approach)
Main Focus	Building personal relationships and emotional care.	Identifying specific needs through performance data.
Basis for Action	Empathy and direct observation.	Educational report analysis and performance evaluations.
Practices	Personal mentoring, monthly coaching, welfare and career support.	Targeted IHT/workshops, technical guidance, competence-based assignments.
Impact on Teachers	Stronger loyalty, intrinsic motivation, and personal commitment.	Improved competence, focused career development, and professional appreciation.
Impact on Students	Students experience a caring and family-like atmosphere.	Students receive better instruction from continuously developing teachers.

4   Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that the implementation of transformational leadership by the principals of SMAN 1 Padalarang and SMAN 1 Lembang consistently promotes teacher performance, although its enactment varies according to each institution's unique context. The four dimensions of transformational leadership - idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration - were not only evident but also operationalized synergistically and adaptively, demonstrating the principals' refined capacity for context-responsive leadership. Both leaders exhibited strategic flexibility in balancing policy mandates with the socio-cultural and institutional realities of their schools, thereby exemplifying reflective and adaptive leadership. Their practices represented dynamic responses to the interplay between innovation, accountability, and teacher autonomy, offering an empirical contribution to the broader discourse on contextualized leadership enactment.

Previous research strongly supports the pivotal role of these four dimensions in fostering teacher motivation and pedagogical effectiveness. Raman et al. (2015) established that charisma, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration enhance teacher enthusiasm, commitment, and innovation. Similarly, Yurt (2024) emphasized

that intellectual stimulation is central to cultivating teachers' critical and creative thinking skills, while Sari et al. (2025) demonstrated that transformational leadership improves teacher motivation and indirectly enhances student learning outcomes through greater collaboration and creativity. The current study extends this theoretical dialogue by examining how these dimensions are localized and enacted in Indonesia's evolving educational policy landscape. This contextual focus expands transformational leadership theory beyond the interpersonal domain into a socio-pedagogical framework that emphasizes institutional adaptability and alignment with national reforms.

While much of the extant literature has focused on correlational relationships between leadership style and teacher performance, relatively few studies have explored the mechanisms through which transformational leadership is adapted to specific institutional and policy contexts. This study addresses that gap by conducting a comparative and contextually grounded analysis of two secondary schools implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. It demonstrates how principals translate transformational leadership principles into pragmatic strategies suited to their local contexts. In doing so, it contributes both to theoretical refinement and to policy-oriented discussions about leadership practice under curriculum reform. By elucidating how school leaders navigate between national directives and contextual constraints, this study positions leadership as a socially embedded process rather than a prescriptive set of behaviors.

4.1 Leadership in SMAN 1 Padalarang

At SMAN 1 Padalarang, the principal exhibited strong idealized influence and inspirational motivation by grounding the school's mission in its identity as a National Adiwiyata School devoted to environmental stewardship. Echoing Raman et al.'s findings on the galvanizing effects of charisma and motivation, the principal acted as a role model through active involvement in ecological programs such as eco-school initiatives, waste banks, and green-park development. This visible commitment fostered professional trust and moral coherence among teachers, motivating them to engage in interdisciplinary environmental projects. The leadership model at Padalarang illustrates that when symbolic and emotional dimensions of leadership are rooted in authentic values, they yield concrete pedagogical and cultural impacts that promote collaboration across subject areas.

Aligned with Yurt's (2024) concept of intellectual stimulation, the principal encouraged reflective practice and curricular innovation through monthly meetings that linked the school's ecological vision to teaching improvement. Teachers were guided to integrate sustainability principles across subjects - for instance, biology teachers implemented inquiry-based Green School projects, while social studies teachers examined environmental issues within socio-economic frameworks. These leadership practices transcended mere motivation by fostering a collective sense of purpose, strengthening

teacher creativity, collaboration, and reflective professionalism. This supports Sari et al.'s (2025) assertion that leadership mediates the relationship between teacher innovation and student achievement. Moreover, the principal's environmentally focused strategy served as a bridge for interdisciplinary integration, aligning cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning domains. Thus, instructional innovation became a shared, value-driven endeavor rather than an isolated individual pursuit.

4.2 Leadership in SMAN 1 Lembang

In contrast, the principal of SMAN 1 Lembang emphasized intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. As one of the pioneering *Sekolah Penggerak* in West Bandung Regency, the school has become a center for pedagogical experimentation under the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Consistent with Yurt's (2024) theory, the principal developed a distributed leadership model that empowered teachers to design differentiated instruction and *Pancasila Student Profile* projects. This autonomy extended beyond procedural independence to epistemic co-construction, positioning teachers as collaborators in innovation rather than subordinates in implementation. The principal's leadership style promoted a professional learning community characterized by shared reflection and democratic participation.

Professional learning structures such as lesson study sessions, coaching clinics, and peer-mentoring forums provided spaces for dialogue, experimentation, and knowledge exchange. These structures align with Sari et al.'s (2025) argument that collegial collaboration enhances instructional creativity. The principal's preference for reflective supervision over bureaucratic control further reflected individualized consideration, enabling teachers to pursue self-directed professional growth. This approach cultivated a climate of psychological safety and mutual trust, empowering teachers to produce original learning materials disseminated via the *Merdeka Mengajar* platform. These outcomes underscore the importance of contextualized transformational leadership in advancing teacher competence and fostering sustainable innovation aligned with national reform goals.

4.3 Comparison and Theoretical Synthesis

Both cases exemplify adaptive forms of transformational leadership that align with Bass and Riggio's framework, which emphasizes inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized support tailored to contextual needs. While most prior studies have focused on psychological correlates such as motivation or job satisfaction, this study situates transformational leadership within broader organizational and policy dynamics. By embedding leadership within the *Merdeka Curriculum* reform context, it reveals leadership as an ongoing process of mediation between national policies and localized

realities. This layered perspective enhances understanding of leadership as an adaptive and multi-dimensional construct.

At SMAN 1 Padalarang, leadership was *practice-driven*, anchored in environmental and sustainability initiatives; at SMAN 1 Lembang, it was *culture-driven*, grounded in pedagogical experimentation and reflective collaboration. These contrasting yet complementary approaches confirm that transformational leadership is a dynamic construct shaped by situational contingencies rather than a fixed behavioral model. In both cases, contextual alignment emerged as a critical determinant of success, influencing how teachers internalized reform principles and implemented them in practice.

This study addresses a key gap in the literature by elucidating the contextual enactment of transformational leadership during curriculum reform. Its comparative analysis demonstrates how leadership effectiveness arises from harmonizing transformational values with policy imperatives and institutional characteristics. It also encourages further research into adaptive leadership mechanisms in diverse school settings, including vocational and rural institutions, where contextual variables exert stronger effects.

Theoretically, the study extends leadership scholarship by showing that the impact of transformational leadership depends on contextual congruence - specifically, the leader's ability to align strategic vision with institutional identity and reform objectives. Practically, it emphasizes the evolving role of principals as epistemic leaders and learning facilitators who empower teachers, cultivate reflective practices, and sustain professional growth aligned with the transformative aims of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. This synthesis advances scholarly understanding of leadership as both a catalyst for systemic change and a vehicle for localized innovation.

5   Conclusion

This study concludes that transformational leadership is vital for enhancing teacher performance and effectively implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. The comparative findings from SMAN 1 Padalarang and SMAN 1 Lembang demonstrate how the four core dimensions of transformational leadership idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration collectively foster teacher motivation, innovation, and collaboration to achieve educational goals. These results indicate that transformational principals successfully translate the vision of Merdeka Belajar into practical actions by empowering teachers, promoting reflective practices, and cultivating a supportive school culture. This underscores that leadership transformation involves not only inspiring teachers but also establishing sustainable systems for professional growth.

The research's novelty stems from its contextual exploration of how transformational leadership principles are adapted to the Kurikulum Merdeka environment. Moving beyond previous correlational studies, this research highlights the practical strategies and contextual   adjustments   principals   utilize   to   lead   educational   change.

Ultimately, the effective implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka largely depends on school leaders' capacity to embody transformational values such as vision, integrity, creativity, and empathy in managing change and empowering teachers toward continuous improvement

6 References

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