



Transformational Leadership of School Principals in Fostering Student Independence at Vocational High Schools in Oku Timur

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenon/Issue: The education sector faces the challenge of fostering not only academic excellence but also essential life skills, particularly independence. This study addresses the pressing issue of vocational high school (SMK) graduates in Indonesia, who often struggle with adaptation to the workforce and possess inadequate entrepreneurial skills. The research investigates the transformational leadership role of school principals in promoting student independence within Eastern OKU Regency's vocational schools.

Purpose: The primary purpose of this study is to explore how principals' transformational leadership can effectively contribute to developing independent, responsible, and decision-making students. This research presents a novel perspective by directly linking transformational leadership practices to student independence, particularly in the context of vocational education, a relatively underexplored area.

Novelty: This research has novelty in directly linking transformational leadership practices with aspects of student independence in the context of vocational education. In addition to making theoretical contributions to the development of educational leadership science, this research also offers a contextual approach that is relevant to the dynamics of education in the region.

Research Methods: Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates qualitative interviews with school principals and quantitative surveys from students to gather comprehensive data on leadership impacts on student character development.

Research Contributions: The contributions of this research are multifaceted. Practically, it offers actionable insights for school principals to enhance their leadership strategies in fostering student independence. The findings are also intended to inform educational policymakers and curriculum developers, promoting responsive vocational education policies that align with contemporary labor market demands.

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and rapid technological advances, the world of education is required to not only produce graduates who excel academically, but also have strong life skills, one of which is independence (Bakker et al., 2023; Greimel et al., 2023). At the global level, the education system in various developed countries has placed character development, especially independence, as the main pillar in forming a generation that is adaptive, creative, and able to make decisions independently (Angrist et al., 2021). The transformation of education in the 21st century encourages a shift from a rigid instructional approach to a participatory and humanistic approach. In this context, the principal's leadership role is not only as an administrator but also as a change agent who is able to inspire the entire school community to move towards renewal (Schmitz et al., 2023).

A similar phenomenon also occurs in Indonesia. The government through Merdeka Curriculum encourages the importance of character education and differentiated learning to form independent and reflective students (Asholikha & Nugraha, 2021). However, the reality on the ground shows that there are still many vocational high school (SMK) graduates who have difficulty adapting to the world of work, lack confidence in making decisions, and do not have adequate entrepreneurial skills (Al Mamun et al., 2019). This shows that the development of student independence has not been fully internalized in the practice of education in schools. One aspect that contributes to this is the suboptimal role of school principals in building a school culture that supports the growth of student independence (Tegor et al., 2023).

This condition is also reflected in the Eastern OKU Regency area, especially in several vocational schools that served as research sites. Initial observations show that most students still have a high dependence on teachers in determining academic and non-academic choices, lack initiative in utilizing existing learning facilities, and have not shown the ability to manage activities independently, both within the scope of the classroom and outside the classroom (Ismiati et al., 2021; Meilasari, 2022). Although there are character strengthening programs designed by schools, their implementation has not been fully consistent and has not actively involved students as subjects of change. In this context, the role of the principal as a visionary and inspirational transformational leader is crucial to bring about changes in the learning culture of students who are more independent and responsible (Bellibaş et al., 2021; Fahri et al., 2022).

Ideally, principals with a transformational leadership style are able to mobilize the entire school ecosystem through a strong vision, individual empowerment, and exemplary action (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2021). Principals are not only policy makers, but also role models and facilitators who are able to create a learning environment that stimulates students' curiosity, confidence and courage to make decisions independently (H. L. Damayanti & Anando, 2021; Tarumasely, 2024; Tegor et al., 2023).

However, the reality is that in many regions, including in vocational schools, there are still many principals who tend to carry out administrative leadership functions, such as managing budgets, preparing schedules, and carrying out operational routines, without really touching the strategic aspects oriented towards changing the overall school culture (Kurnia, 2022; Refliana & Pertiwi, 2023). In fact, in the context of vocational education, the challenges faced by students are very complex, not only related to technical skills, but also mental readiness and character to be independent in facing the world of work and social life.

Based on a report from the Directorate of SMK of the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2023, it was noted that around 61% of SMK graduates experienced difficulties in entering the workforce directly, one of the main causes was the lack of soft skills such as independence, responsibility, and decision-making ability. This data is reinforced by the results of the National Survey of Student Character Resilience (Kemdikbudristek, 2022) which states that only 43% of SMK students show high indicators of independence, while the rest are still very dependent on the direction of teachers or parents. This condition indicates that the formation of students' independent character has not run optimally and can be attributed to the weak influence of the principal's leadership in building a school climate conducive to character development (Darsih et al., 2023; Ghamrawi et al., 2024; Rachmaningtyas & Khoirunnisa, 2022; Tarumasely, 2024). This imbalance between managerial and transformational roles is a structural obstacle in the process of forming independent students. If principals only focus on administrative matters without being agents of change, then schools will only become formal institutions that produce graduates with technical skills but lack mental endurance, independence, and social competencies that are essential in the real world (Muliati et al., 2022; Praditya, 2022).

One important strategy is to strengthen principals' transformational leadership practices by focusing on student character development. This strategy emphasizes the importance of leadership that encourages innovation, lifelong learning and healthy collaboration between teachers, students and outsiders (Ardinata et al., 2022; Purwanto, 2022). Principals are expected to be not only structural leaders, but also learning leaders who are able to facilitate students' personal growth through a humanistic and reflective approach (Nuban et al., 2025; Tegor et al., 2023).

However, there are still gaps in existing research. Previous studies tend to focus on the relationship between principal leadership and teacher performance or school management quality (Darsih et al., 2023; Ghamrawi et al., 2024). Meanwhile, studies that specifically explore the contribution of principals' transformational leadership to the formation of students' independence, especially in the SMK environment and in a local context such as Eastern OKU, are still very limited. This is the research gap that this study aims to fill, focusing on how principals' transformational leadership can play a direct role in creating students who are academically, socially and emotionally independent (D. Damayanti & Asbari, 2024; Fullan et al., 2024).

This research has novelty in directly linking transformational leadership practices with aspects of student independence in the context of vocational education. In addition to making theoretical contributions to the development of educational leadership science, this research also offers a contextual approach that is relevant to the dynamics of education in the region. This is important considering the characteristics of SMK students who tend to be directed to be work-ready and entrepreneurial-ready, thus requiring leadership that is able to stimulate independence from school.

The urgency of this research is even higher considering the importance of preparing human resources who do not only rely on technical skills, but also have the ability to take initiatives, solve problems, and innovate independently. In the midst of complex economic and labor challenges, SMKs as productive labor producers must have principals who are able to form an independent and progressive learning culture. Without transformative leadership intervention, SMKs will find it difficult to produce competent and independent graduates.

The implications of this research are expected to be able to provide practical contributions for

school principals in developing more effective leadership strategies in shaping student character. In addition, the findings can also be taken into consideration by the Education Office, curriculum developers, and related parties in formulating vocational education policies that are more responsive to the challenges of the times. Academically, this research is expected to enrich the literature on the relationship between transformational leadership and student character development at the vocational secondary education level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformational leadership at SMK OKU Timur plays a crucial role in shaping student independence, which is an essential competency in vocational education. (Deng et al., 2023). In this context, the principal functions not only as an administrative manager but also as an agent of change who can inspire and empower school members (Hakiki & Sundayana, 2022). Through a clear vision and individualized attention, transformational leaders create a learning environment that supports active student participation, encouraging them to take responsibility and initiative in their learning processes. (Bramantha, 2019; Sofya et al., 2023).

However, the challenges in implementing transformational leadership are quite complex. The dominance of conventional leadership patterns that are bureaucratic often hinders innovation and active participation. (Alfi Nur Hidayati, 2021; Savitri, 2020). Many principals remain trapped in technical management and routine tasks, neglecting strategic aspects such as character development and school culture. Additionally, a lack of understanding and competence in transformational leadership serves as a barrier, as not all principals have adequate training to fulfill the role of change leaders. (Izzah et al., 2023; Ningsih & Lusy, 2021).

On the student side, challenges arise from low intrinsic motivation and learning habits that still depend on teacher direction. Many vocational students in regions like OKU Timur are accustomed to instructional approaches, making them less confident in taking initiatives. (Kanah & Mardiani, 2022; Sofya et al., 2023). Therefore, principals need to create a learning climate that is adaptive and innovative, capable of fostering student independence. (Izzah et al., 2023; Ningsih & Lusy, 2021). An approach focused on character development, contextual learning, and the active involvement of all school members is crucial to overcoming these challenges..

By employing the dimensions of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, principals can encourage students to become individuals who are not only technically skilled but also emotionally and mentally mature. (Ardinata et al., 2022; Purwanto, 2022). Through learning models that promote independence, such as project-based learning and problem-solving, principals act as the main drivers in shaping student character. Thus, transformational leadership at SMK OKU Timur is not merely a managerial strategy but a fundamental necessity in addressing the challenges of 21st-century education. (Ahmed, 2022; Praditya, 2022).

On the students' side, challenges arise from low intrinsic motivation and learning habits that still depend on teacher direction. Many SMK students in regions such as OKU Timur are still accustomed to the instructional approach, lack confidence in taking initiatives, and are not used to being given the space to make decisions independently (Ghamrawi et al., 2024; Rachmaningtyas & Khoirunnisa, 2022). This demands serious and sustained efforts from school principals to create a learning climate that is able to shape student independence, in ways that are adaptive, innovative and based on contextual needs. Therefore, the implementation of transformational leadership in SMK OKU Timur must be done gradually, consistently, and supported by strengthening leadership capacity and the involvement of all school members as a whole (Nuban et al., 2025; Savitri, 2020).

Transformational leadership at SMK OKU Timur plays a crucial role in shaping student independence, which is an essential competency in vocational education. In this context, the principal functions not only as an administrative manager but also as an agent of change who can inspire and empower school members. Through a clear vision and individualized attention, transformational leaders create a learning environment that supports active student participation, encouraging them to take responsibility and initiative in their learning processes. (Kaur Bagga et al., 2023; Schmitz et al., 2023).

However, the challenges in implementing transformational leadership are quite complex. The dominance of conventional leadership patterns that are bureaucratic often hinders innovation and active participation. (Fadillah et al., 2025). Many principals remain trapped in technical management and routine tasks, neglecting strategic aspects such as character development and school culture. Additionally, a lack of understanding and competence in transformational leadership serves as a barrier, as not all principals have adequate training to fulfill the role of change leaders. (Alfi Nur Hidayati, 2021; Sofya et al., 2023).

Moreover, the involvement of external stakeholders, such as local industries and educational authorities, is vital for the successful implementation of transformational leadership. Collaborations can provide valuable resources, mentorship opportunities, and real-world experiences that enhance students' learning. By establishing partnerships with these stakeholders, principals can create programs that align educational goals with workforce demands, thereby better preparing students for future challenges.

Finally, continuous professional development for principals and teachers is essential to sustain transformational leadership practices. Training programs that focus on innovative teaching methods, emotional intelligence, and collaborative leadership can equip school leaders with the skills needed to inspire and motivate their teams effectively. As principals become more adept at navigating the complexities of educational leadership, they can foster an environment that not only promotes student independence but also cultivates a culture of lifelong learning and adaptability among both educators and students.

RESULTS

The findings indicate that transformational leadership practiced by principals at SMK OKU Timur is effectively implemented and positively influences both school culture and student character development.(Kilag & Sasan, 2023; Shofiyyah et al., 2023). The principals are perceived as role models who embody discipline and integrity, which aligns with the dimension of idealized influence. Their ability to inspire students through a clear vision demonstrates the importance of inspirational motivation in fostering an engaging educational atmosphere(Fadillah et al., 2025; Ismiati et al., 2021). Furthermore, principals encourage innovation and critical thinking among students, reflecting the intellectual stimulation aspect of transformational leadership. By showing individual attention to the needs of students and teachers, they create a supportive learning environment that promotes student independence through active involvement in school activities and decision-making.

However, the results also reveal that students' levels of independence vary significantly. Some students exhibit responsibility, initiative, and decision-making abilities, particularly when engaged in practical activities and independent projects.(D. Damayanti & Asbari, 2024; Wiriani, 2021). In contrast, others remain dependent on teacher guidance and lack confidence in their abilities. Factors influencing this independence include family environment, teaching methods, and the level of support from teachers and principals. A supportive learning environment that allows for exploration is crucial in nurturing an independent character among students, highlighting the need for a holistic approach to educational leadership.(Fullan et al., 2024; Tarumasely, 2024).

The study further uncovers a significant thematic relationship between principals' transformational leadership and students' independence. In-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and students reveal that the transformative leadership style of principals serves as a critical driving force in creating a conducive learning environment. (Refliana & Pertiwi, 2023; Tegor et al., 2023). Principals who act as role models and communicate inspiring visions, while encouraging teacher innovation and providing individual attention to students, foster a school culture that promotes responsibility and initiative in learning.(Asholikha & Nugraha, 2021; Kurnia, 2022).

Despite the positive impacts of transformational leadership, challenges remain. While strong leadership vision and the principal's openness, along with support from innovative teachers, facilitate student independence, obstacles such as teachers' limited understanding of independence-focused learning, unsupportive student backgrounds, and inadequate learning facilities persist.(Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2021; Shofiyyah et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the principal's active involvement and the cultivation of an inclusive school culture play vital roles in gradually developing students' independent attitudes.(Kamah & Mardiani, 2022; Nuraini et al., 2023).

Qualitative research findings indicate that principals at SMK OKU Timur employ transformational leadership strategies by establishing a school vision centered on student independence.(Ismiati et al., 2021; Zaky & Setiawan, 2023). They strengthen project- and practice-based learning and foster a participatory learning environment. Additionally, principals encourage teachers to utilize active learning methods and provide personalized coaching to students.

This comprehensive strategy builds students' confidence, responsibility, and initiative, thereby supporting the development of sustainable independence.(Darsih et al., 2023; Meilasari, 2022).

DISCUSSION

The results showed that principals in SMK OKU Timur have implemented transformational leadership style through exemplary, motivational, intellectual stimulation, and individualized attention. This finding is in line with Ardinata et al., (2022) theory which emphasizes that transformational leadership is able to drive behavior change through inspiration and empowerment. Principals not only act as managers, but also as agents of change who create a school environment conducive to learning and character development. Practices such as building open communication, appreciating students' efforts, and inviting teachers to innovate have become the main force in influencing students' attitudes and mentality towards a more independent direction (Deng et al., 2023).

Students' independence at SMK OKU Timur can be seen in their ability to make decisions, take responsibility for tasks and show initiative in the learning process. However, the level of independence still varies, influenced by family background, learning motivation, and learning patterns applied by teachers. This finding corroborates Ahmad, (2022) concept of independence, that a supportive social environment will facilitate the emergence of intrinsic motivation and independent behavior. In schools that encourage students' active involvement and give them trust, independence tends to grow naturally. On the other hand, rigid and overly directive learning approaches tend to inhibit the process (Fahri et al., 2022).

This research shows that there is a close relationship between the transformational leadership of school principals and the level of student independence. Leadership dimensions such as inspirational motivation and personalized attention contribute to shaping students' confidence and responsibility. Principals who are directly involved in students' activities, give room for initiative, and value their participation, create ideal conditions for the development of independence. This is in line with previous findings that empowering leadership tends to increase students' involvement and autonomy in learning (D. Damayanti & Asbari, 2024; Shofiyyah et al., 2023)

Supporting factors for the successful implementation of transformational leadership include the principal's commitment, the support of some teachers, and the existence of contextual learning programs (Fadillah et al., 2025; Kilag & Sasan, 2023). Meanwhile, the main obstacles come from teachers who have not implemented an active approach, students who are not accustomed to being given responsibility, and limited school facilities. In a qualitative context, these challenges show that transformational leadership cannot stand alone, but requires collaboration, habituation and systemic support in order to produce a real and sustainable impact on student independence (Ismiati et al., 2021).

Principals at SMK OKU Timur implement transformational leadership strategies by instilling a shared vision, building a positive school culture, and encouraging learning innovation. Programs such as entrepreneurship projects, field work practices, and student involvement in organizational activities are effective tools in shaping independent character (Izzah et al., 2023; Ningsih & Lusy, 2021). A personal approach is also taken by providing space for dialogue and direct coaching to students.

These strategies strengthen the principal's position as a leader of change and show that the transformational leadership style is very relevant in the vocational education environment (Alfi Nur Hidayati, 2021; Lipscombe et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion of qualitative research conducted at SMK OKU Timur, it can be concluded that the transformational leadership of the principal plays an important role in realizing student independence. Principals who are able to be role models, motivate, encourage innovation, and provide personal attention have created a school environment that supports the growth of independent attitudes in students. This independence is reflected in students' ability to make decisions, take responsibility for tasks, and take the initiative in the learning process and school life. The relationship between transformational leadership and student independence is mutually reinforcing, where the stronger the transformational role of the principal, the greater the opportunity for the formation of independent student characters. However, there are challenges in its implementation, including teachers' limited understanding of active learning, students' diverse social conditions and limited supporting facilities at school. Nevertheless, principals at SMK OKU Timur have demonstrated adaptive and progressive leadership strategies, such as building a shared vision, encouraging active participation and creating an inclusive school culture. These strategies not only encourage changes in student behavior but also strengthen collaboration between principals, teachers and students. Thus, it can be concluded that the application of transformational leadership is an effective and relevant approach to shaping student independence in the context of vocational education, and can be a model of school leadership that promotes overall educational transformation.

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