

Characteristics of Transformational and Digital Leadership Among Principals of Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools

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Keywords:	Abstract
<i>Transformational Leadership, Educational Quality, Integrated Islamic Elementary School.</i>	<i>This study describes the characteristics of the principal's transformational leadership at SDIT Nurul Iman Palembang, an integrated Islamic elementary school, analyzes the application of digital leadership to strengthen educators' innovation, examines personality and human resource development programs for educators, and explains how transformational leadership shapes organizational change and the quality of education. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through one month of participatory observation, semi-structured interviews with five teachers, and a review of documentation, and were then analyzed inductively using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model regarding data condensation, presentation, and the drawing of conclusions and verification. The findings indicate that the school principal demonstrated eight ideal leadership traits and four transformational dimensions: charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration, while gradually adopting digital tools to monitor learning and communicate with parents, in addition to a structured character-building program for teachers. These practices strengthened teachers' commitment, learning outcomes, and institutional management. This study concludes that transformational leadership drives continuous quality improvement in integrated Islamic elementary education.</i>
Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan Transformasional, Kualitas Pendidikan, Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu	Penelitian ini menguraikan karakteristik kepemimpinan transformasional kepala sekolah di SDIT Nurul Iman Palembang, sebuah sekolah dasar Islam terpadu, menganalisis penerapan kepemimpinan digital untuk memperkuat inovasi pendidik, menelaah kepribadian serta program pengembangan sumber daya manusia bagi pendidik, dan menjelaskan bagaimana kepemimpinan transformasional membentuk perubahan organisasi dan kualitas pendidikan. Dengan menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif selama satu bulan, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan lima guru, serta tinjauan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis secara induktif menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña terkait kondensasi data, penyajian, serta penarikan kesimpulan dan verifikasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kepala sekolah menunjukkan delapan sifat kepemimpinan ideal dan empat dimensi kepemimpinan transformasional karisma, motivasi

inspirasi, stimulasi intelektual, dan perhatian terhadap individu sambil secara bertahap mengadopsi alat digital untuk memantau pembelajaran dan berkomunikasi dengan orang tua, serta menerapkan program pembentukan karakter yang terstruktur bagi para guru. Praktik-praktik ini memperkuat komitmen guru, hasil belajar, dan manajemen institusi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kepemimpinan transformasional mendorong peningkatan kualitas yang berkelanjutan dalam pendidikan dasar Islam terpadu.

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1. Introduction

Education remains the foundation for developing the character and quality of a nation's human resources. In Indonesia, this mandate is increasingly carried by Islamic schools that seek to combine academic achievement with strong religious and moral formation. The Integrated Islamic Elementary School (*Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu*, SDIT) is a prominent example: it integrates the national curriculum with Islamic teaching, character building, and Qur'anic learning, so that pupils grow academically while acquiring Islamic principles, noble character, and the ability to read and understand the Qur'an from an early age (Alsharbi et al., 2021). This is precisely the role Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools: SDIT Nurul Iman Palembang plays within its community. However, this dual mandate is demanding: the school must meet formal academic standards, sustain a distinctive religious and character-building identity, and respond to parents' growing expectations in an increasingly digital environment (Ghamrawi, 2023; OKunlola & Naicker, 2025).

Meeting these demands depends, in large part, on the quality of leadership a school can draw on. Leadership determines how effectively an organization's resources are mobilized and how convincingly its members are guided toward shared goals, and research shows that leadership process, competence, and action together rank among the strongest internal predictors of organizational success (Fahlevi et al., 2022). Effective leaders, in this view, are less defined by positional authority than by selflessness, compassion, and service orientation (Ellahi et al., 2022; Saleem et al., 2020). It follows that whether a school like Nurul Iman SDIT moves forward or stagnates depends substantially on the character of the principal leading it.

Among the various leadership styles available to a principal, transformational leadership has drawn particular scholarly attention as a philosophy suited to schools (Afrizal & Ikhwan, 2025). The reason is straightforward: a school's culture and productivity are shaped directly by its principal's leadership style, and transformational leadership in particular has been linked to significant, sustainable organizational change (Kalkan et al., 2020; Sultana et al., 2024). Evidence for this comes from research showing that transformational leaders inspire followers, advance organizational missions, and accelerate change through personal influence rather than positional authority (Nguyen et al., 2023), consistently strengthening teacher commitment in the process. This suggests that the choice of

leadership style is not incidental to a school's trajectory, but rather one of its primary determinants.

This determinant effect becomes especially visible when comparing institutions that struggle with those that thrive. Poor leadership principles, such as a lack of clear vision, failure to inspire teachers, or resistance to necessary change, correlate closely with institutional stagnation, whereas transformational leadership tends to cultivate an innovative, growth-oriented culture (Haryaka et al., 2026; Ramos, 2025). At Nurul Iman SDIT, this dynamic carries an added layer of complexity: improving educational standards there requires not only inspiring teachers but reconciling Islamic values and Qur'anic programs with national curriculum requirements and increasingly complex modern educational demands, which in turn requires leadership that is spiritually grounded as well as administratively and technologically capable. The principal's role, in other words, is not merely supportive but central to whatever progress the school can achieve. Research on character education points in the same direction, identifying transformational leadership as a means of strengthening character-building programs in schools (Komala, 2023), while Rachman et al. (2023) likewise highlight the role of visionary leadership in character education.

Given how central this role appears to be, one would expect a substantial body of research to guide it, yet the existing literature, while informative, remains fragmented. Several studies confirm that transformational leadership positively and significantly shapes organizational change in schools (Alzoraiki et al., 2023) and that digital leadership constitutes an increasingly important dimension of school leadership in the technological era (Karakose & Tülübaşı, 2023; Nagel et al., 2026), while Mayangsari et al. (2022) show that structured personality development and leadership programs can meaningfully strengthen educators' soft skills. Taken individually, each of these findings is well-supported; taken together, however, they reveal that leadership characteristics, digital adaptation, and human-resource development have so far been studied largely as separate concerns, and rarely within integrated Islamic schools, where religious character formation and academic demands must be led together.

This fragmentation matters particularly for integrated Islamic schools such as SDIT. Their dual mandate of academic excellence and religious character formation means that principals must simultaneously uphold national curriculum standards, sustain Islamic and Qur'anic programs, and adapt to digital change, which arguably makes transformational leadership an especially consequential catalyst for improvement (Sariakin et al., 2025). However, to the authors' knowledge, few studies have examined, within a single integrated Islamic school, how a principal's transformational leadership traits, digital leadership practices, and educator-development efforts interact to jointly shape organizational change and educational quality. The gap, then, is not merely that SDIT are understudied in general, but that the three relevant strands of leadership research have rarely been brought together in the specific setting where their interaction may matter most.

It is this gap that the present study seeks to close. Rather than treating leadership traits, digital adaptation, and human-resource development as separate concerns, it examines them as interconnected dimensions of a single principal's leadership practice within one integrated Islamic elementary school. Because this interconnection is precisely what previous studies have not captured, doing so constitutes the study's central contribution: it offers rich, context-specific

qualitative evidence of how these dimensions operate together, rather than another survey-based generalization about any one dimension in isolation.

Capturing that kind of interconnection called for a research design capable of depth rather than breadth. For this reason, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach, which allows the leadership traits exhibited by the principal of SDIT Nurul Iman Palembang to be examined comprehensively within their natural organizational context. This approach makes it possible to draw directly on the perspectives of those most closely involved in that context, yielding an understanding that broader, more generalized methods would be unlikely to reach.

Building on this rationale, the study pursues four specific aims to describe the characteristics of transformational leadership displayed by the principal of SDIT Nurul Iman Palembang; to analyze how digital leadership is used to strengthen educator innovation; to examine personality-development and human-resource programs for educators within this leadership context; and to explain how transformational leadership shapes organizational change and educational quality at the institution. Together, these aims are intended to contribute both theoretically and practically to leadership development in Islamic schools.

Theoretically, because the gap identified above concerns the integration of leadership dimensions within a specific institutional type, the findings are expected to enrich the literature on Islamic education management, particularly regarding effective, integrated leadership models in integrated Islamic schools. Practically, they are intended to serve as a guide for school foundations, principals, and education stakeholders in SDIT and similar Islamic schools seeking to strengthen their leadership capacity, ultimately making Islamic education more relevant and meaningful to the wider community.

2. Methods

This study employs a case study design within a qualitative framework. This approach was chosen because the research aims to examine, in depth and within its natural context, the transformational leadership traits exhibited by the principal of SDIT Nurul Iman Palembang, an integrated Islamic elementary school that combines the national curriculum with Islamic and Qur'anic programs. Qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to draw on the perspectives of participants directly involved in this context to build a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The principal of SDIT Nurul Iman Palembang served as the primary subject of observation, whose day-to-day leadership practices were documented through direct engagement with the institution. To triangulate and contextualize these observations, the study also drew on teachers (*ustadz/ustadzah*) as the primary interview informants, supplemented by informal input from parents and foundation administrators regarding institutional processes and program development. Teachers were selected as the main interview subjects because, as the individuals working most closely under the principal's day-to-day leadership, they were best positioned to speak in depth to the specific leadership behaviors this study sought to examine. Three main methods were used to collect data: participatory observation conducted over one month to directly observe how the principal led meetings, daily operational activities, and professional development initiatives; in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five teachers, each lasting

between 45 and 90 minutes, to capture their first-hand experience of the principal's leadership in practice; and a documentation review of relevant institutional records, including assignment letters, activity reports, and work plans, which also incorporated contextual information gathered informally from parents and foundation administrators. Subject selection followed a purposive sampling approach, and source and methodological triangulation across observation, interviews, and documentation was used to strengthen the validity of the data.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), comprising three concurrent processes: (1) data condensation, the selection, focusing, simplification, abstraction, and transformation of raw data from field records; (2) data display, the organization of information in a form that supports conclusion drawing and action; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, testing the accuracy and fit of emerging findings against the collected data. This analytic process was carried out inductively and iteratively throughout the study to ensure depth and consistency of interpretation.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. *Transformational Leadership in Educational Theory and Practice Perspectives*

Among the various leadership models relevant to Islamic schools, transformational leadership stands out as the most fitting approach for value-based institutions such as Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools: SDIT Nurul Iman Palembang. Transformational leadership, as a process of inspiring followers to place organizational interests above personal ones, is an orientation well suited to the school's dual character as an institution with both spiritual and intellectual dimensions (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Crawford et al., 2026). Consistent with this framework, field findings show that the principal of Nurul Iman SDIT has successfully developed and communicated the school's vision while empowering all its members. This pattern suggests that the principles of transformational leadership can be effectively adopted in an integrated Islamic school setting, reinforcing the theory's relevance to Islamic education. This theoretical internalization becomes tangible in the way the principal handles organizational problems. As one teacher, Mr. R, recalled:

"Our principal is a calm and wise person. When there is a problem, he does not panic; instead, he invites us to sit down together to find the best solution. This makes us feel confident and trust him."

Such a calm, collaborative approach to problem-solving illustrates that idealized influence, one of the defining traits of transformational leadership, is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived practice at Nurul Iman SDIT.

A similar pattern emerges when these findings are set alongside earlier research on transformational leadership and teachers' work engagement (Ekasari et al., 2026; Rohmad et al., 2024). Muktarom et al. (2026), for instance, argue that transformational leadership sharpens teachers' perception of change and deepens their engagement at work, which in turn builds support for organizational change. The same tendency appears among teachers at Nurul Iman SDIT, who reported greater enthusiasm, creativity, and commitment to organizational goals after directly experiencing the principal's leadership style. These results therefore corroborate Muktarom et al. (2026) and point to a consistent relationship between transformational leadership and teachers' work engagement within an Islamic

school setting. The inspirational-motivation dimension of transformational leadership is likewise visible in how the principal frames the meaning of teaching the Qur'an. As Mrs. S explained:

"Every time the principal reminds us of how noble it is to teach the Qur'an to children, our enthusiasm is immediately reignited. She always emphasizes that our work is an extraordinary field of good deeds."

Rather than relying on administrative instruction alone, the principal appears to mobilize teachers by reviving the spiritual significance of their work, a direct expression of the inspirational-motivation dimension within transformational leadership theory.

This approach becomes even more compelling when contrasted with transactional leadership, which centers on the exchange of rewards and sanctions. The contrast matters because teaching in a value-based Islamic school is sustained not only by material incentives but also by a sense of meaning and purpose (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Crawford et al., 2026). At Nurul Iman SDIT, the principal consistently sustains teachers' enthusiasm by invoking the spiritual value of teaching the Qur'an rather than financial rewards. This strategy has proven durable over time. Taken together, these findings indicate that a transformational approach appears better suited and more sustainable for institutions such as SDIT than a purely transactional, reward-based model.

3.2. *Eight Characteristics of Ideal Leadership and Their Implementation*

Among the eight ideal leadership traits identified by Waedoloh et al. (2022), honesty and accountability stand out as the primary moral foundation of the Nurul Iman SDIT principal's leadership. The two authors argue that honesty cultivates a culture of integrity while building trust among all members of an organization, a pattern borne out at Nurul Iman, where the principal consistently discloses financial conditions and program progress at every monthly meeting, sustaining trust among parents and the wider school community (Komala, 2023). Teachers, in turn, appear to internalize this same sense of responsibility in carrying out their duties (Shavard, 2023), suggesting that honesty and accountability together form a crucial foundation for the collective trust that sustains the program. This practice of transparency was confirmed directly by the teachers who attend the monthly meetings. As Mrs. N described it:

"Our principal always openly discusses the financial status and program developments at every monthly meeting. We feel valued and trusted, which makes us more enthusiastic about our work."

Beyond building trust, her account suggests that transparency also strengthens teachers' sense of being valued and their enthusiasm for work, reinforcing the broader point that honesty functions as a leadership trait with tangible effects on organizational climate, not merely an abstract virtue.

Visionary thinking represents another prominent feature of the principal's transformational leadership profile. Leaders with a clear vision, according to Waedoloh et al. (2022), are able to translate that vision into concrete, measurable, and gradually achievable direction for their organization, while also inspiring their teams through openness and trust. This is evident at Nurul Iman SDIT, where the principal set a specific target for improving students' Qur'an memorization and comprehension, a concrete expression of vision that succeeded in motivating teachers to work with greater commitment and enthusiasm. It is this clarity and measurability of vision, more than any single directive, that appears to drive collaboration and shared commitment among the institution's educators.

Rounding out this profile are three mutually reinforcing traits: initiative, discipline, and openness. Fatonah (2023) notes that discipline sets a direct example for an organization, initiative drives positive dynamics and new programs, and open communication prevents confusion or misunderstanding among members, and each of these dynamics is visible in the principal's daily conduct at Nurul Iman SDIT. The principal demonstrates punctuality and consistent follow-through on program implementation, actively develops new and creative initiatives, and communicates openly enough that teachers understand directives without ambiguity. Together, these traits foster a productive and harmonious organizational climate that sustains the institution's broader vision. The encouragement of initiative and openness to innovation surfaces clearly in teachers' own accounts of developing new instructional methods. Mr. F recalled:

"The principal often encourages us not just to teach the old way. He supports us in trying new methods and even sets aside special time so we can share experiences and ideas with our fellow teachers."

This concrete gesture of setting aside dedicated time for teachers to exchange ideas indicates that the principal's emphasis on initiative and openness is not merely rhetorical, but is backed by tangible policies that give teachers real room to innovate.

3.3. *Personality Development and Human Resources of Educators in Educational Leadership*

The development of educators' personalities and human resources is one of the key strategies employed by the principal of Nurul Iman SDIT to improve the quality of education. This strategy is important because pedagogical competencies and personal competencies are interrelated in the development of teaching staff, and every teacher essentially also serves as a leader for the students they mentor. Teachers at Nurul Iman SDIT are expected to have the ability to build relationships, collaborate, and contribute effectively in the classroom, while upholding a professional code of ethics as educators. Thus, strengthening both pedagogical and personal competencies is a crucial prerequisite for teachers to fulfill their dual roles as both educators and leaders for the students.

The principal of Nurul Iman SDIT designed a structured character and leadership development program for all educators. This structured program is necessary because the development of teachers' character and leadership cannot be left to natural processes alone but requires planned intervention (Mucinskas et al., 2025). The program includes study visits to other leading Islamic schools, training in the latest Qur'an teaching methods, workshops to enhance pedagogical competencies, individual coaching, and regular discussion and reflection forums. These programs have been shown to not only improve teachers' technical skills but also foster significant development in their leadership and character. The personal attention shown by the principal is also an important part of individual human resource development. Based on an interview with Mrs. L:

"The principal once called me personally just to ask how I was doing and if there were any difficulties I was facing. His sincere attention makes me feel that I am not just a team member, but part of the big family at Nurul Iman SDIT."

This experience underscores that the principal's sincere, personal approach helps foster a sense of belonging and family, which ultimately strengthens

teachers' commitment to their own professional development and to the institution.

The principal's exemplary leadership serves as the most effective method for shaping the character of educators within the Nurul Iman community. This is because the quality of a leader's personal character directly influences and shapes the character of those they lead, making exemplary leadership one of the most powerful avenues for human resource development (Monzani et al., 2021). The principal of Nurul Iman SDIT demonstrates high emotional intelligence in handling various situations, ranging from resolving conflicts and managing work-related stress to celebrating achievements with the teachers. This kind of exemplary leadership has proven to be far more effective in fostering a positive work culture than mere verbal instructions alone, making it a worthy model for the professional development of educators in similar Islamic schools.

Overall, the personal and professional development of educators at Nurul Iman SDIT forms an interrelated cycle of reinforcement among structured programs, personal attention, and leadership by example. This interconnection is important to emphasize because these three elements do not stand alone; rather, they mutually reinforce one another in building the comprehensive capacity and character of educators. Teachers who participate in development programs, receive personalized attention, and consistently observe the principal's exemplary leadership demonstrate improvements in both technical competence and leadership maturity. Thus, it can be concluded that the development of educators at Nurul Iman SDIT is effective because it is carried out in an integrated manner, combining programmatic, relational, and personal leadership aspects exemplified by the principal.

3.4. Implications for Leadership Development in Integrated Islamic Schools

Beyond its practical relevance to Nurul Iman SDIT, this study contributes to the literature on transformational leadership in Islamic schools, an area in which leadership is expected to be grounded in religious values as well as managerial competence (Alazmi & Bush, 2024). The finding that transformational leadership remains effective at Nurul Iman SDIT, where the principal must hold academic standards together with Islamic and Qur'anic character formation, suggests that the theory can be meaningfully applied and enriched within integrated Islamic schools, whose organizational character differs from that of general schools.

Translating this into practice, the structured development of principals' transformational leadership competencies should be treated as a priority for Islamic schools generally. Mayangsari et al. (2022) point out that leadership competencies rarely mature without planned, sustained training and mentoring, and the case of Nurul Iman SDIT bears this out. The principal's effectiveness did not emerge overnight; it was cultivated through the principal's sustained participation in training sessions, seminars, and knowledge-sharing forums. This suggests that similar structured competency-building should be replicated across other integrated Islamic schools if comparable outcomes are to be achieved more broadly.

Such competency-building, however, cannot succeed in isolation from institutional support. School foundations and Islamic education administrators play an essential enabling role, since principals are rarely positioned to drive change on their own without adequate resources, training, and room to innovate.

The organizational changes achieved at Nurul Iman SDIT, including a renewed vision and mission and a restructured management system, were possible precisely because the principal was granted that space to innovate (Leuwol et al., 2023). Foundations and administrators overseeing Islamic schools would therefore do well to actively extend resources and autonomy to school principals as a condition for sustained leadership transformation.

Looking ahead, two priorities stand out for the future development of leadership in integrated Islamic schools: digital leadership and teacher character development. The first responds to a broader structural pressure, as schools increasingly need to adapt to technological change; the second remains, as ever, foundational to long-term educational quality. Nurul Iman SDIT has already begun to act on both fronts, adopting a digital learning management application to track students' memorization progress and communicate with parents, while sustaining its regular teacher character-building programs. Given this early progress, integrating digital leadership with character development on an ongoing basis would allow SDIT to meet contemporary educational demands without losing sight of values and character formation.

Taken together, the five teachers' accounts discussed throughout this study Mrs. N's openness in sharing information, Mr. R's composure in problem-solving, Mrs. S's emphasis on the spiritual significance of teaching, Mr. F's support for innovative methods, and Mrs. L's sincere personal attention converge on a consistent and mutually reinforcing picture of transformational leadership in practice. It is this convergence that grounds the practical recommendations above: the implications for leadership development in integrated Islamic schools such as SDIT rest not only on theoretical reasoning but on concrete evidence drawn from teachers' lived experience.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to describe the transformational leadership characteristics of the principal of SDIT Nurul Iman Palembang, analyze the role of digital leadership in strengthening educator innovation, examine personality-development and human-resource programs for educators, and explain how transformational leadership shapes organizational change and educational quality. The findings address each of these aims in turn. The principal was found to embody eight ideal leadership traits, namely honesty, intelligence, accountability, vision, fairness, discipline, initiative, and openness, together with the four core dimensions of transformational leadership: charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized attention, all substantiated through teachers' first-hand accounts. Digital leadership, while still at an early stage, has begun to strengthen institutional transparency and administrative efficiency through the adoption of digital learning-management tools. Structured character-development programs, personal mentoring, and the principal's own exemplary conduct have jointly enhanced teachers' technical competence and leadership maturity. Collectively, these practices have driven meaningful organizational change at Nurul Iman SDIT, including a renewed vision and mission, a more accountable management system, and improved student memorization outcomes, demonstrating that transformational leadership functions as the central driver of sustainable educational quality in integrated Islamic elementary education and offering a model that other Islamic schools may adapt with appropriate institutional and foundation support.

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