

Transformational Leadership: The Role of The Public School Principal in Effective Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

Background. The increasingly complex and uncertain education system demands that principals make strategic decisions that not only ensure organizational effectiveness but also drive continuous quality improvement. Although transformational leadership is considered relevant because it emphasizes shared vision, participation, and empowerment, empirical evidence on how these principles are operationalized in the decision-making practices of public elementary school principals remains limited, particularly in the context of novice leadership. This study aims to analyze in depth the decision-making practices of principals with a Guru Penggerak background in two public elementary schools in Sumedang Regency, their impact on school quality improvement, and the challenges and strategies they use to overcome them.

Method. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with two principals and six teachers, and then analyzed thematically with systematic procedures to ensure credibility and consistency of interpretation.

Result. The findings indicate that democratic, collaborative, adaptive, reflective, and data-driven decision-making practices reflect the core dimensions of transformational leadership, namely idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, which contribute to improving school climate, teacher performance, student learning outcomes, and strengthening professional development. Challenges such as limited resources, ethical dilemmas, and policy constraints are addressed through inclusive communication, ethical reasoning, and strategic use of data.

Conclusion. This study empirically clarifies the concrete mechanisms that link principals' decision-making practices to transformational leadership theory in a VUCA context, while also confirming its contribution as a

conceptual and practical framework for strengthening school leadership capacity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Decision-making in the educational ecosystem is not merely an administrative process, but a concrete representation of a principal's direction, values, and leadership spirit. Principals have a significant responsibility in strategic and effective decision-making to improve the quality of education. Decisions made by principals will impact to a meaningful teacher development (Husain, 2024), job satisfaction, teacher commitment, and enthusiasm (Park et al., 2023), school discipline and climate (Mboweni & Taole, 2022; Sorensen et al., 2022), and long-term student achievement (Semper et al., 2021). Therefore, decisions made must be truly wise and responsible. Through decision-making, principals identify and select alternative solutions that refer to various factors and the decision-maker's expectations to achieve specific goals. (Ofem & Wang, 2023). Systematically, Thakkar (2021) states the stages of decision-making, namely (1) identifying the decision to be taken, (2) determining criteria and options for evaluating alternative solutions to the problem, (3) assessing various alternatives according to the established criteria, and (4) determining the best alternative as the decision. This process certainly requires adequate effort and skills, including cognitive skills such as critical thinking, processing complex information, and creativity to find innovative solutions. (Krieger & Greiff, 2023).

However, decision-making involves considerable complexity. Leaders often face numerous challenges in decision-making that significantly impact the effectiveness of their leadership and their organizations. These challenges include, first, complexity and uncertainty. Leaders must make decisions in times of uncertainty, which complicates the decision-making process and requires complex solutions and a comprehensive understanding of the dilemmas at hand (Lowy & Hood, 2004; von Ameln, 2021). Hanhimäki (2024) added that problems intensify and ethical dilemmas arise when conflicting values are involved. Second, under pressured conditions. In critical situations, leaders must make quick decisions without in-depth analysis of the problem. They are required to manage diverse interests and optimize resources effectively (Gissing, 2022)—third, the social and cultural context. Organizational culture and social context can impact decision-making, allowing for more complex dilemmas (Lowy & Hood, 2004; von Ameln, 2021). This situation makes it increasingly difficult for newly appointed principals to make appropriate and effective decisions. According to Sandoval-Estupiñán et al. (2020), this occurs because they lack sufficient understanding of their roles and hands-on experience in decision-making and problem-solving. This reduces the ability to utilize theoretical knowledge effectively in real-world settings. They also often feel isolated and struggle to manage relationships, which impacts their ability to adapt within the school

community and build trust with staff and stakeholders (Service & Thornton, 2020; Tahir et al., 2021).

Effective decision-making among school principals necessitates a structured approach to improve decision quality and support school success. Based on several studies, the main characteristics that support effective decision-making by school principals include participatory and collaborative decision-making (Campos-García & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2022), the principal's emotional intelligence (Kanavas & Triantari, 2024), and effective communication (Khasawneh et al., 2024). In addition, effective decision-making requires strengthening principal leadership that integrates decision-making processes with ethical values (Stansberry Beard, 2025), ensuring adequate resources and organizational support, and creating relevant and accountable policies (McLaughlin et al., 2025). Therefore, the principal needs to formulate and evaluate decisions through 9 steps, namely (1) identifying conflicting values, (2) determining the parties involved in the problem, (3) collecting relevant facts and evidence, (4) determining the ethical soundness of values, (5) examining the right vs. wrong paradigm, (6) applying the principle of resolution, (7) investigating the trilemma options, (8) making a decision, and (9) reflecting on the decision (Nurcahyani & Rajasa, 2022).

Challenges in principals' decision-making processes underscore the urgency of a leadership approach that balances procedural rigor with effective people and organizational change management. Therefore, the concept of transformational leadership serves as an important theoretical foundation for understanding this process. Transformational leadership is a leadership approach that goes beyond managing administrative functions and emphasizes individual and organizational transformation through a shared vision, motivation, and empowerment of members, ensuring their collective commitment to achieving organizational goals. Bass & Riggio (2006) explain that transformational leaders inspire and motivate followers to set aside personal interests to achieve collective values and goals, while also enhancing their readiness to respond to various change demands. Pitichat & Riggio (2025) emphasize that the core of transformational leadership lies in four main dimensions: idealized influence, which makes the leader a trusted role model; inspirational motivation, which creates commitment to a shared vision; intellectual stimulation, which encourages creativity and involvement in problem-solving; and individualized consideration, which facilitates personal growth and support for team members. Such dimensions offer a comprehensive framework for analysing decision-making, given that transformational leaders do not merely impose decisions hierarchically but also foster reflective, collaborative, and innovative cultural orientations throughout each stage of the process.

Transformational leaders endowed with a coherent vision demonstrate the capacity to align individual decisions with long-term organizational priorities by adopting a purposeful, strategically valuable orientation (Valero-Pastor et al., 2021). Employing inspirational and

participatory leadership approaches, the principal strengthens awareness of individual responsibility in advancing a common vision, while ensuring a dynamic balance between structural demands and personal aspirations (Aas et al., 2020). This approach promotes the development of a collaborative and inclusive culture (Pérez-Torralba et al., 2022). It facilitates innovation and intrinsic motivation, which directly contribute to improving the quality of learning (Roesminingsih et al., 2025). Thus, decisions are not merely a reflection of the leader's will, but rather the result of reflective dialogue and collective participation (Kareem et al., 2023). The quality of decisions influences both organizational achievement and the construction of leadership credibility as perceived by internal members and the surrounding context. Accordingly, principals, especially those at the early stage of their tenure, must embrace adaptive, transformational leadership models that emphasize constructive change. By optimizing their leadership values, they can make effective decisions to improve organizational performance (Hsu & Chang, 2021) and, even in times of crisis, remain capable of inspiring and mobilizing member participation in decision-making processes (Alkhawani et al., 2021).

Study on transformational leadership in the school context continues to grow, particularly its impact on increasing school effectiveness (Alanoglu & Karabatak, 2025) and development of school culture (Wilson Heenan et al., 2023). However, existing studies largely treat decision-making as a byproduct of leadership or as an isolated general construct (Mulford & Silins, 2021), without comprehensively examining the process, behavior, and dynamics of principal decision-making within a transformational leadership framework, particularly in the context of complexity, ethical dilemmas, and situational pressures in schools. Furthermore, studies that integrate the dimensions of transformational leadership values, decision-making stages, and their impact on holistic school quality improvement remain limited and tend to emphasize quantitative, perception-based approaches. Therefore, this study examines in depth how novice principals apply transformational leadership principles in decision-making, identifies emerging behavioral traits, analyzes the challenges and strategies they employ, and explains their implications for holistic school quality improvement.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study framework to explore, in depth, the leadership of novice principals in the naturalistic context of public elementary schools, because it enables the revelation of experiential meanings and social dynamics that cannot be sufficiently explained through quantitative inquiry (Satori, D., Aan, 2014).

The sample was determined purposively with the following criteria: (1) public elementary schools, (2) led by a principal with a tenure of less than three years, and (3) a principal with a background as a Guru Penggerak. Based on these criteria, two schools, with two principals

and six teachers in Sumedang Regency, were selected that had taught for at least two years and were directly involved in leadership interactions.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews administered according to a guided protocol, recorded with informed consent, and enriched through detailed field notes. Data collection was concluded when no further information was obtained. Triangulation was conducted through a comparative examination of principal and teacher perspectives, and the data were analysed using an interactive framework comprising recurring stages of reduction, presentation, and verification until stable thematic patterns emerged. Researchers systematically identified patterns, themes, and meanings while maintaining the consistency and validity of the findings (Eacott, 2015). Furthermore, data validity was established by applying rigorous criteria, including credibility achieved through triangulation and member checking, transferability supported by detailed contextualization, dependability ensured via audit trails, and confirmability strengthened through researcher reflexivity. Ethical approval from all respondents was obtained for the implementation of the study and the reporting of its outcomes, guaranteeing anonymity, voluntary withdrawal, and secure data handling.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the data analysis provided the basis for addressing the research questions. Informant sources were structured, then analytically grouped into distinct categories: leadership behaviour, organizational communication climate, participation in decision-making, decision quality, effects of implementation, and decision-making challenges.

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Leadership Behaviour

The findings reveal that teachers regard the principal's leadership behaviour as assertive, democratic, transparent, inspiring, adaptive, and professionally exemplary, a perception grounded in observed consistency in decision-making, participatory management practices, open communication, motivational support, adaptive responsiveness to change, and integrity enacted in everyday leadership activities. This is in line with G1's statements:

"...her leadership is commendable, particularly in terms of decisiveness and clearly demonstrated policies. Despite her relatively young age, she appears capable of providing effective guidance..."

G1's opinion is supported by G3's statement, namely:

"...she (the principal) is a very inspiring figure. ...in terms of his presence and discipline, I really give him a thumbs up, because she is not only gentle but also firm..."

G3 added that:

"...she does not insist that monitoring must follow a rigid format; instead, she becomes directly involved, thereby modeling the expected practices..."

Meanwhile, G5 stated that the principal's leadership:

"She demonstrates a notably democratic orientation in both decision-making and the formulation of school policies. She remains highly receptive to any input we provide. However, the final policy ultimately reflects what is considered most appropriate; the principal consistently shows protectiveness toward her staff and expresses genuine appreciation for every contribution."

Consistent with G5's perspective, G3 expressed the view that:

"The principal is very approachable; in fact, she frequently seeks advice from many teachers when making decisions, asking what actions would be most appropriate and what suggestions might be beneficial. She consistently invites us to share our perspectives and collaboratively identify solutions."

3.1.2 Organizational Communication Climate

The results show that principals are considered capable of establishing effective and transparent two-way communication in school management, including decision-making. This aligns with the G6 statement:

"The principal can communicate clearly and effectively with staff, students, and parents, and can build good relationships with all parties involved in school activities."

This statement is in accordance with the opinion of G4, which states:

"...clear and open communication, openness to feedback, and transparency. The principal is accountable for communicating and conveying decisions made."

Then, G1's statement confirms that:

"When I communicate with her, I feel like there is no distance, like we are just friends."

3.1.3 Participation in Decision Making

The findings indicate that in the decision-making process, principals actively involve various parties through discussion forums and meetings. As stated by a principal (KS1), who stated:

"I always discuss or hold deliberations with all stakeholders when making a decision, asking for opinions from teachers so that a consensus is reached, even though the principal still has the highest authority."

The principal (KS2) also expressed the same thing:

"I regularly conduct meetings, focus groups, and open forums to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to express their opinions. I also use surveys and meetings with the school committee to gather perspectives."

The G6 statement supports this:

"The principal always consults with stakeholders. For example, the principal often involves various stakeholders in the decision-making process, including teachers, staff, students, parents, and the school committee. Such consultation may be conducted through meetings, discussion forums, or surveys to obtain diverse input and perspectives."

3.1.4 Decision Quality

The findings indicate that the principal's decisions were perceived as effective and aligned with the needs of teachers and students, an evaluation grounded in respondents' views that each policy was formulated through a systematic process incorporating strategic, pedagogical, and contextual considerations for school development.

For effective decision-making outcomes, KS2 states that:

"I use a consensus-based and data-driven approach. I gather information from various stakeholders, discuss available options, consider their impacts, and make decisions that most effectively address the school's needs."

Regarding the decision results, G1 said that:

"*Alhamdulillah*. Thus far, whenever the principal determines a program, it is well received, no significant obstacles arise, and the school community can implement the established program effectively."

G2's statement is supported by G6's opinion, namely:

"The decisions made by the principal are highly aligned with the needs of teachers and students; for instance, she organizes regular teacher training on innovative instructional methods."

3.1.5 Impact of Decision Implementation

According to a study, decisions made by principals significantly improve teacher performance, the quality of the learning process, and school achievement. This aligns with the KS1 statement:

"A range of introduced changes and new routines has had a positive impact on strengthening teachers' competence and accountability while simultaneously improving student learning quality, as evidenced by accomplishments in competitions and rising school performance indicators."

In line with this, the G5 stated that:

"The principal's decisions have generated positive outcomes, not only in terms of the learning process but also in strengthening teacher collaboration and performance across the school."

G6's opinion reinforces G5's statement:

"The principal's decisions exert a substantial influence on the learning process, as reflected in areas such as curriculum development, teacher professional training, and the provision of instructional resources, all of which directly affect the quality of classroom teaching."

3.1.6 Barriers to Decision Making

The findings demonstrate that the decision-making process within schools entails various constraints, most notably limited budgets and differences of opinion among stakeholders, as expressed in G5's statement:

"...opinions vary, and several proposed solutions cannot be accommodated due to budget constraints."

In addition to these factors, government policies also pose a challenge for principals in decision-making. This was revealed by a KS2 student who stated:

"One of the biggest challenges is the difference of opinion between teachers, parents, and government policies. Sometimes, the policies that must be implemented do not completely align with everyone's expectations."

To overcome this, KS2 stated that:

"Maintaining open communication with all stakeholders, employing a data-driven approach to support decisions, and adopting a personal approach when objections arise."

In addition, KS1 emphasized the presence of further constraints manifested as ethical dilemmas.

"In circumstances where individuals must decide between two morally sound but contradictory values, any chosen course of action inevitably carries ethical implications."

KS1 proposed solutions to overcome these obstacles, namely:

"Reconsidering, taking into account the 4 paradigms and 3 principles of decision making."

The principal recognizes the complexity of decision-making challenges and therefore acknowledges the importance of enhancing competencies, particularly in conflict management, as indicated in KS2's statement:

"I aim to enhance my competencies in conflict management and technology-based decision-making in order to manage schools more efficiently and accurately."

Meanwhile, KS1 places greater emphasis on the importance of prudent judgment in decision-making, stating:

“We can exercise greater wisdom in making decisions by considering all relevant aspects, collaborating with others, and adopting a more adaptive approach.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Principal Behavior in Decision Making in the Context of Transformational Leadership

The principals in these two public schools demonstrated transformational leadership in decision-making, characterized by democratic and collaborative approaches, and provided space for teachers, staff, and parents. This aligns with Ngwenya & Phuthi (2022), who stated that transformational leaders involve stakeholders in decision-making to build trust, strengthen collaboration, and improve adaptive performance. Moreover, principals can establish constructive communication, maintain openness to feedback, and show genuine appreciation by adopting the suggestions. The implication is that such a leadership orientation not only builds motivation, trust, and shared commitment but also increases decision-making effectiveness because decisions draw upon richer data, multiple viewpoints, and collective backing that facilitates implementation.

In addressing complex issues, principals can adapt to contextual conditions, place the common good above self-interest, sustain a focus on students' needs, and ensure that decisions remain aligned with established policy directives such as curricular provisions. In accordance with this, other studies have shown that transformational leaders are adaptive and innovative. Adaptiveness is crucial for effective and relevant decision-making in the ever-changing educational context (Mystakidou & Brinia, 2022; Yan & Yuet, 2025). Principals take strategic steps in decision-making, including collecting and utilizing data, analyzing, and reflecting. These findings support the view of Smuts & Smith (2021), who argued that integrating relevant analytical data facilitates accountable decision-making, while reflective evaluation ensures that decisions are both wise and inclusive of multiple perspectives.

Thus, these characteristics illustrate the integrated enactment of the dimensions of transformational leadership as previously proposed by Pitichat & Riggio (2025). A participatory and collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders demonstrates the enactment of idealized influence and individualized consideration, fostering trust while recognizing each member's contribution to decision-making processes. Patterns of dialogic communication and reciprocal deliberation signify inspirational motivation, reflecting the leader's ability to cultivate shared commitment through open and meaningful engagement. Meanwhile, transparency, adaptability, and innovation in responding to contextual issues illustrate intellectual stimulation by promoting critical inquiry and generating alternative solutions. A reflective, data-informed orientation integrates these dimensions into practice, producing decisions that are rational, accountable, and conducive to strengthening participation, trust, and collective organizational capacity.

3.2.2 Impact of Decision Making on Improving School Quality

The principal's decisions help establish a conducive school environment, thereby fostering a more positive climate and reinforcing organizational values such as teacher discipline and work ethic. It aligns with Mboweni & Taole (2022) and Sorensen et al. (2022), who stated that principal decisions foster a positive school climate and discipline among school personnel. Furthermore, this finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that principals' decisions, particularly those related to academic supervision, can significantly enhance teacher performance (Herman & Khalaf, 2023; Mailool et al., 2020) and long-term student achievement (Semper et al., 2021). Transformational decision-making among principals further demonstrates its value by responding to stakeholder needs while simultaneously producing relevant innovations, thus directly strengthening teachers' professional capacity in pedagogy and classroom management. Correspondingly, Kareem et al. (2023) and Yan & Yuet (2025) emphasized that school innovation fosters empowerment and collaboration among teachers to improve their performance practices. Thus, effective principal decision-making plays a strategic role in cultivating a positive school climate, reinforcing organizational values such as discipline and work ethic, and improving teacher performance. These effects are manifested in improved learning quality and student achievement. Moreover, the principal's transformational leadership fosters contextually relevant innovations, advances teachers' professional development, and consolidates a culture of collaboration and empowerment through professional learning communities.

3.2.3 Challenges for Principals in Decision Making in the Context of Transformational Leadership and Efforts to Address Them

Principals who enact transformational leadership, particularly within public school contexts, frequently encounter substantial challenges, as they are required to reconcile government policies that may not always align with their institutional vision and mission with the constraints of centralized decision-making systems. The situation creates significant pressure and complicates decision-making, making their work even more challenging. Nevertheless, by adopting adaptive and innovative approaches, principals can cultivate environments that not only comply with policy requirements but also foster the growth and development of all members of the school community. These findings reinforce Ramjit's (2023) argument that when policies are perceived as inappropriate or unfair, transformational leaders must continue to work within the boundaries of existing policies, consistently inspiring and providing full support to their teams.

The next challenge is limited resources and budget constraints, which affect school operations and directly hinder the implementation of innovative programs designed to improve the quality of education. In the context of transformational leadership, funding limitations may curtail principals' ability to support teachers and students optimally. When innovation is not fully realized, the school's developmental trajectory is restricted. In line with

Tamadoni et al. (2024), this condition constitutes a significant barrier to initiatives aimed at establishing an inclusive, adaptive, and highly competitive learning environment. Consequently, principals are required to possess strong managerial and collaborative skills to optimize existing resources and forge strategic partnerships to support the sustainable achievement of school goals.

Moreover, principals commonly confront stakeholder disagreement and multifaceted situations involving competing values, both of which intensify the complexity of decision-making. Tahir et al. (2021) emphasized that this situation creates complexities that require comprehensive discussion and agreement. In this uncertain situation, they need to have a deep understanding and be able to formulate more complex solutions to the various problems (Lowy & Hood, 2004; von Ameln, 2021). Therefore, amid the increasingly dynamic challenges of the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) era, educational leaders must be ready, flexible, and quick to make the right decisions (Rohilla & Jindal, 2024). The capacity to adapt rapidly to change and formulate innovative strategies constitutes a critical determinant of success in establishing a resilient and responsive learning environment.

Although confronted with various constraints, both principals sought to overcome these challenges by fostering open communication, facilitating deliberative dialogue, employing data-driven decision-making, and adopting individualized responses to conflicting perspectives. Regarding the ethical dilemma of decision-making, the principals applied four decision-making paradigms: individual versus community (individual vs. community), justice versus mercy, truth versus loyalty (truth vs. loyalty), and short-term versus long-term (short-term vs. long-term). In addition, they applied three decision-making principles: Ends-Based Thinking, Rule-Based Thinking, and Care-Based Thinking. These decision-making skills align with the decision-making paradigms in the Guru Penggerak Module (Nurcahyani & Rajasa, 2022).

Additional strategies employed by school principals to address challenges in decision-making include adopting more judicious, adaptive decision-making approaches, enhancing conflict-management competencies, and leveraging technology to support data-driven decisions. Kinchington (2023) confirms that a wise and adaptive approach makes decisions more contextual, flexible, and responsive to school dynamics. Meanwhile, competent conflict management helps sustain collective cohesion, and differing perspectives are treated as essential and respected features of the decision-making process (Ramjit, 2023). Then, the integration of AI and data analytics in decision-making increases transparency and accountability, thereby strengthening trust and ensuring that decisions can be professionally accounted for (Mitchell, 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

Transformational leadership in these two case studies demonstrates democratic, collaborative, communicative, adaptive, innovative, reflective, and data-driven decision-

making patterns, which impact the development of a positive school climate, strengthening organizational values, improving teacher performance, learning quality, student learning outcomes, and creating innovations contextual to school needs and teacher professional development. Despite constraints related to limited resources and budgets, divergent perspectives, complex conditions, and government policies that do not always accommodate all interests, principals who embody transformational leadership values demonstrate the capacity to manage these challenges effectively. Theoretically, these findings enrich the study of educational leadership with empirical evidence on the role of transformational leadership in decision-making in primary education, particularly in complex and dynamic situations. In practical terms, this study emphasizes the critical need to develop principals' competence in collaborative decision-making, effective conflict resolution, and the strategic use of data to guide school policy. These findings are likewise significant for policymakers, as they underscore the need for adaptive, context-sensitive regulations that enable schools to respond effectively to real conditions in the field while maintaining accountability. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged, namely the limited case sample, the context-bound nature of the study, and the possible subjectivity of qualitative evidence; accordingly, subsequent research is encouraged to broaden contextual coverage, employ mixed-method or longitudinal approaches, and investigate more specifically the ethical dimensions of decision-making under conditions of dilemma. This can provide a more comprehensive understanding of effective school leadership practices amid VUCA dynamics in education.

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