Transformational Leadership Model of School Principals in Strengthening Civic Values: A Case Study at Erlangga Senior High School

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Abstract

This study examines the role of transformative leadership exercised by the school principal in strengthening civic values at SMA Swasta Erlangga Pematangsiantar. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research explores leadership strategies, implementation processes, and challenges in fostering an inclusive and adaptive school culture within a small-scale private school context. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observation involving the principal, teachers, and students. The findings reveal that transformative leadership, manifested through moral role modeling, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, effectively enhances the involvement of teachers, students, parents, and the surrounding community in internalizing civic values. These values are reflected in collaborative learning practices, student organizational activities, and school–community partnerships. Despite challenges such as social media influence, limited resources, and varying parental expectations, transformative leadership functions as a significant agent of change in addressing the demands of the digital era and social diversity. The study concludes that continuous leadership development and strengthened school–community collaboration are essential to optimizing civic education.

Keywords: *Transformative Leadership; Civic Values; School Principal*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji peran kepemimpinan transformatif kepala sekolah dalam penguatan nilai-nilai kewarganegaraan di SMA Swasta Erlangga Pematangsiantar. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus untuk mengeksplorasi strategi kepemimpinan, proses implementasi, serta tantangan dalam membangun budaya sekolah yang inklusif dan adaptif di konteks sekolah swasta berskala kecil. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, diskusi kelompok terarah, dan observasi partisipatif yang melibatkan kepala sekolah, guru, dan siswa, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan transformatif yang diwujudkan melalui keteladanan moral, motivasi inspiratif,

stimulasi intelektual, dan perhatian personal mampu meningkatkan keterlibatan seluruh warga sekolah dan masyarakat dalam internalisasi nilai kewarganegaraan. Meskipun menghadapi kendala pengaruh media sosial, keterbatasan sumber daya, dan dinamika dukungan orang tua, kepemimpinan transformatif terbukti efektif sebagai agen perubahan. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya pengembangan kepemimpinan berkelanjutan dan penguatan kemitraan sekolah–masyarakat dalam optimalisasi pendidikan kewarganegaraan.

Kata Kunci: *Kepemimpinan Transformatif; Nilai Kewarganegaraan; Kepala Sekolah*

INTRODUCTION

Civic education in the digital era faces increasingly complex challenges, as the mere memorization of national values is no longer sufficient to counter intolerance, social fragmentation, and the rapid spread of misinformation (Zai et al., 2024). In a broader global context, the urgency of strengthening civic values is driven by the rapid transformation of the digital information landscape. The erosion of traditional social cohesion and the rise of digital polarization present unprecedented challenges to educational institutions (Iswiyanto, 2025). Schools are no longer just places for academic transfer but are the frontline defense in preserving democratic civility. In the digital ecosystem, students are increasingly exposed to algorithmic segregation, where social media platforms reinforce existing biases and filter out opposing viewpoints. This "echo chamber" effect poses a direct threat to the core civic values of tolerance and dialogue. Consequently, schools are forced to evolve from being mere centers of knowledge transmission into "civic shields" that protect students from the fragmentation of society.

The necessity for transformative leadership is amplified by the phenomenon of "post-truth" politics and the erosion of civic trust. Recent studies emphasize that character and civic education must be supported by both curriculum design and authentic role modeling within the school environment (Razali, 2024). In this context, the role of the school principal becomes crucial as a key agent in shaping values and school culture. Unlike traditional administrative roles, modern principals must exercise "civic moral agency" to navigate the intersection between local cultural values and global digital influences. This global-local tension necessitates a leadership approach that is deeply rooted in personal integrity yet adaptive to modern challenges. Transformative leadership offers a relevant framework to address these challenges (Bass, 1985; Reid & Dold, 2018). Through its dimensions, school leaders are expected not only to manage institutions administratively but also to inspire moral commitment, critical thinking, and social responsibility among teachers and students.

There is a growing body of literature examining the impact of leadership on school outcomes, though specific focus on civic values remains developing. (Effendi, 2020) found that culture-based leadership can create

exemplary behavior in schools. Furthermore, (Erdoğan & Clement, 2023) highlighted the importance of the principal's expressive support in increasing organizational citizenship behavior. On the other hand, (Santoso, 2025) proved that transformational leadership is effective in increasing student responsibility. While these studies confirm that transformative leadership contributes to positive school culture and student behavior, most existing research predominantly focuses on public schools or large educational institutions with relatively stable resources and formal organizational structures. There is a scarcity of empirical evidence detailing how these leadership dimensions are operationally enacted to counter specific digital-era challenges within the constraints of smaller private institutions.

This reliance on data from large institutions creates a significant gap in the literature. Limited attention has been given to small-scale private schools, where leadership practices are shaped by close interpersonal relationships, limited resources, and strong familial dynamics. These smaller institutions, often operating with unique "family-like" dynamics, offer a distinct ecological setting for leadership. Methodologically, previous quantitative research has successfully established correlations between leadership styles and student outcomes but often overlooks the "micro-political" processes the daily negotiations and subtle role-modeling moments that actually drive these outcomes. By focusing on this under-researched context, this article offers a novel perspective on how transformative leadership is not just a structural function but a relational practice deeply embedded in the specific fabric of a small school community.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining the implementation of transformative leadership in SMA Swasta Erlangga Pematangsiantar. Specifically, the study investigates how the principal operationalizes the four dimensions of transformative leadership to strengthen civic values and foster an inclusive school culture. By focusing on a micro-level educational context, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of transformative leadership practices and their role in strengthening civic education within diverse and resource-limited school settings.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a single-case study design conducted at SMA Swasta Erlangga Pematangsiantar. The school was purposively selected due to its characteristics as a small-scale private institution with an average class size of fewer than fifteen students, allowing for intensive interaction among school members. The research context is critical to understanding the findings. Situated in Pematangsiantar, a city known for its high level of tolerance in Indonesia, the school operates within a heterogeneous social environment. Despite its status as a private institution with limited infrastructure compared to state schools, SMA Swasta Erlangga

relies heavily on strong interpersonal bonds between staff and students. This unique "high-touch, low-tech" environment serves as a natural laboratory to observe how human-centric leadership strategies can compensate for structural limitations in fostering civic values. The research participants consisted of the school principal as the key informant, a civic education teacher, and students from grades X to XII.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observation of daily school interactions related to leadership practices and civic value implementation. The use of multiple data collection techniques aimed to capture rich and comprehensive insights into the leadership dynamics within the school context. Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Specifically, the process of data condensation involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting the raw data from interview transcripts and field notes into meaningful themes such as "trust-building," "moral modeling," and "civic habituation." Data display was achieved through the creation of matrices to map the intersection between specific leadership actions and student responses, which facilitated the identification of recurring patterns. Finally, conclusion drawing involved stepping back to consider what the analyzed data meant and assessing their implications for the research questions, while verification entailed revisiting the field notes to ensure the conclusions were robust and grounded in evidence. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, source and technique triangulation were applied. This methodological approach enabled a systematic and credible examination of how transformative leadership practices contribute to the strengthening of civic values in the school setting.

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, including the principal, teachers, and students (with parental notification for minors). The researchers ensured that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. To protect the privacy of the subjects, particularly in a small school setting where identification is easy, all data were anonymized during the analysis, and specific identifiers were removed. This ethical rigor ensures that the findings are not only scientifically valid but also socially responsible.

Research Limitations and Contextual Boundaries

While this study provides rich insights, it is important to acknowledge its methodological limitations. First, as a single case study situated in a specific cultural context (Pematangsiantar) and institutional setting (a small private school), the findings cannot be statistically generalized to the wider population of schools in Indonesia. The dynamics of leadership in a small "family-like" school differ significantly from those in large, bureaucratic public schools

where structural constraints might limit the principal's ability to exercise individualized consideration. Therefore, the "transferability" of these findings depends on the similarity of the context in which they are applied.

Second, the study relies on the perceptions of the principal, teachers, and students, which are subject to social desirability bias the tendency of participants to present their school in a favorable light. Although triangulation of data sources was employed to mitigate this, the possibility of "halo effects" in describing the principal's leadership cannot be entirely ruled out. Future research would benefit from a longitudinal design to track the long-term impact of these leadership strategies on students' civic behavior after they graduate. Despite these limitations, this research offers a valuable "thick description" of how transformative leadership operates in a resource-constrained environment, offering a conceptual blueprint for other small schools facing similar challenges.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Idealized Influence: Moral Role Modeling in School Culture

The findings of this study indicate that the principal's leadership practices at SMA Swasta Erlangga Pematangsiantar align closely with the core dimensions of transformative leadership. Rather than relying on bureaucratic or structural authority, the principal adopts a cultural and relational approach that strengthens civic values through daily interactions and school-wide practices.

The dimension of idealized influence is reflected in the principal's consistent moral role modeling. Through direct presence and informal interaction with students and teachers, the principal demonstrates discipline, respect, and integrity in everyday school life. This practice fosters trust and emotional attachment, positioning the principal as a moral reference rather than a distant authority figure. Such role modeling facilitates the internalization of civic values, as students learn ethical behavior through observation and interaction.

In the specific context of a small private school, this strategy of "Management by Wandering Around" gains a unique sociological significance. Unlike in large public institutions where the principal might remain a distant administrative figure, the physical proximity in a small school amplifies the impact of the leader's behavior. Every action taken by the principal is visible and scrutinized by the school community, creating a transparent "moral curriculum." This phenomenon aligns with the concept of the "micro-politics" of schooling, where leadership is not defined by formal decrees but by daily relational transactions. By consistently embodying the values of discipline and warmth, the principal effectively narrows the gap between the school's formal vision and its daily reality, proving that in a small-scale setting, the leader's persona is the strongest instrument of influence. Furthermore, the synthesis

of these findings can be visualized through a conceptual model as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Three Pillars in Strengthening Civic Values

Explanation of the Model: Based on the research findings, this study proposes a conceptual model comprising three interconnected pillars. First, Civic Vision serves as the philosophical foundation, emphasizing democratic values, justice, and critical awareness. Second, Transformative Practice translates this vision into action through collaborative learning, active participation, and critical skill development manifested in the principal's leadership strategies. Third, School Ecosystem Support ensures sustainability through an inclusive culture, community partnership, and adequate facilities. These three pillars interact dynamically: the vision guides the practice, the practice is enabled by the ecosystem, and a strong ecosystem reinforces the realization of the civic vision.

Inspirational Motivation: Encouraging Civic Engagement through Participation

Inspirational motivation is evident in the principal's efforts to cultivate collective responsibility and participation. All students are encouraged to take active roles in school activities, including student organizations and collaborative programs. This inclusive participation strategy promotes a sense of belonging and shared responsibility, which contributes to the development of civic engagement and social awareness. By communicating a clear vision that every individual matters, the principal strengthens students' commitment to active citizenship.

This strategy of total participation resonates with the findings of (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999), who argue that transformational leadership significantly influences organizational conditions, which in turn foster student engagement. By involving students in decision-making processes and giving them specific responsibilities, the principal at SMA Swasta Erlangga is effectively altering the "organizational conditions" to be more inclusive.

Leithwood and Jantzi emphasize that student identification with school a sense of belonging is crucial for engagement. The principal's approach of ensuring no student is left passive directly cultivates this sense of belonging, transforming the school culture from a static educational facility into a dynamic community where civic values are practiced, not just taught.

Furthermore, the long-term implication of this inclusive participation strategy is the cultivation of "civic efficacy" among students. When students are trusted with genuine responsibilities not just tokenistic roles they develop a belief in their ability to influence their community. This is a critical foundation for democratic citizenship. In many larger educational settings, students often experience alienation or passivity due to bureaucratic layers that separate them from decision-making. However, at SMA Swasta Erlangga, the principal's insistence on total participation ensures that the school functions as a miniature democratic society. This experience provides students with the "cultural capital" necessary to participate as active citizens in the wider society post-graduation, validating the school's mission to produce not just academically competent graduates, but socially responsible citizens.

Intellectual Stimulation: Promoting Critical Thinking and Democratic Dialogue

The principal also demonstrates intellectual stimulation by supporting democratic learning environments. Teachers are encouraged to implement discussion-based and reflective learning strategies that allow students to express opinions and engage with social issues critically. Small class sizes enable meaningful dialogue and tolerance for diverse perspectives, reinforcing democratic values and critical civic reasoning. This approach shifts learning from rote memorization toward reflective and participatory civic education.

Furthermore, this practice aligns with the concept of "layering" leadership strategies as described by (Day et al., 2016). In their study of effective schools, they found that successful leaders do not rely on a single approach but combine transformational strategies (like building vision) with instructional focus (like improving teaching quality) to shape school culture. At SMA Swasta Erlangga, the principal exerts intellectual stimulation not only by encouraging critical thinking but by creating a safe environment for democratic dialogue. This demonstrates a sophisticated understanding that establishing civic values requires a "synergistic influence" where leadership values, teaching strategies, and school culture reinforce each other to improve student outcomes beyond just academic grades.

The relevance of this intellectual stimulation strategy is particularly pronounced in the context of the current digital information era. By fostering a climate of democratic dialogue and critical questioning, the principal is essentially building students' "cognitive resilience" against the spread of

misinformation and intolerance often found on social media. The classroom democracy practiced at SMA Swasta Erlangga serves as a counter-narrative to the echo chambers students might encounter online. By allowing diverse opinions to be voiced and debated respectfully within the small class setting, the principal transforms the school into a safe "public sphere" (Habermasian public sphere). This confirms that transformative leadership in civic education is not merely about transmitting knowledge, but about equipping students with the intellectual tools to navigate a complex, pluralistic society.

Individualized Consideration: Personal Support within a Family-Oriented School Environment

Individualized consideration emerges as a key strength of leadership in this school. The principal maintains close personal relationships with students and teachers, providing guidance and emotional support tailored to individual needs. This family-oriented school culture nurtures empathy, solidarity, and mutual respect core affective dimensions of civic values (Rismawati et al., 2025). Students are more receptive to moral guidance when they feel acknowledged and valued as individuals.

This finding is particularly significant when contrasted with the depersonalization often reported in larger educational settings. In mega-schools, students can easily become anonymous statistics, potentially leading to disengagement and alienation. However, in the specific context of SMA Swasta Erlangga, the "smallness" of the institution allows the principal to act almost as a surrogate parent, creating a psychological safety net that is essential for the internalization of values. This suggests that the structural limitation of size is, paradoxically, the school's greatest pedagogical asset in character education, allowing for a depth of "human-centric" interaction that is rarely achievable in more bureaucratic institutions.

Challenges in Sustaining Transformative Leadership Practices

Despite its effectiveness, the implementation of transformative leadership faces several challenges. Parental expectations often prioritize academic achievement over character development, creating tension with the school's civic-oriented vision.

This tension is exacerbated by the prevailing competitive educational marketplace where schools are often judged by parents solely based on university acceptance rates or exam scores. Parents, driven by anxiety for their children's future economic stability, may view time spent on civic activities, student organizations, or community service as a distraction from academic drilling. Consequently, the principal must constantly engage in "educational diplomacy," educating the parents that character building and academic success are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing, and that soft skills gained from civic engagement are crucial for their children's long-term career success. Additionally, limited physical resources typical of small private

schools pose structural constraints. However, the principal addresses these challenges by strengthening communication with parents and compensating for material limitations through strong interpersonal relationships and community collaboration. In this context, transformative leadership serves as a bridging mechanism between pragmatic demands and long-term civic education goals.

The challenges faced by the principal in this study also confirm (Hallinger, 2011) assertion regarding the contextual nature of leadership. Hallinger emphasizes that "leadership for learning" is not a one-size-fits-all formula but must be adapted to the specific school context, including its constraints and community values. The tension between parental demands for academic results and the school's vision for character building illustrates that leadership is enacted within an "open system" that is influenced by societal and institutional pressures. Therefore, the principal's ability to navigate these limitations compensating for lack of resources with strong relational bonds is a critical evidence of adaptive leadership that prioritizes "values leadership" to protect what is important for the school's long-term vision.

Beyond these immediate challenges, a deeper systemic risk lies in the issue of sustainability and leadership succession. The current success of civic value internalization relies heavily on the personal charisma and individual approach of the current principal. Without a systematic institutionalization of these values into permanent school policies and culture, there is a risk that these practices could erode if leadership changes. This highlights the need for "institutional support" that goes beyond the figure of the leader. The foundation and the school committee need to codify these transformative practices into the school's long-term strategic plan to ensure that the character-building mission survives beyond the tenure of a single leader. This implies that for small private schools, the transition from "person-based leadership" to "system-based culture" is the ultimate challenge for long-term viability.

CONCLUSIONS

This study finds that the transformative leadership exercised by the principal of SMA Swasta Erlangga Pematangsiantar plays a significant role in strengthening civic values within the school community. The effectiveness of this leadership is closely linked to the school's small-scale context, which enables intensive relational engagement and the optimal implementation of individualized consideration. Civic values such as tolerance, responsibility, mutual respect, and social awareness are internalized through everyday practices, collaborative learning, and active participation among school members, rather than through normative instruction alone. These findings demonstrate that material resource limitations do not necessarily hinder

character education when leadership prioritizes moral example, relational depth, and daily value enactment.

The implications of this study challenge educational policies that emphasize standardization and physical infrastructure as primary indicators of school quality. Instead, the findings highlight the decisive role of "soft infrastructure," particularly leadership quality and school culture, in fostering civic education, especially in small private schools. Accordingly, educational policy should place greater emphasis on leadership development programs that foreground ethical orientation, emotional intelligence, and community building. School success, therefore, should be assessed not only through academic achievement but also through the sustained cultivation of democratic character and social trust amid the pressures of globalization and digitalization.

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