

# The Meaning of the Principal's Transformational Leadership Style for Teacher Motivation in Adapting to the Philosophy and Approach of the Independent Curriculum

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the significance of the principal's transformational leadership style for teacher motivation in adapting to the philosophy and approach of the Independent Curriculum at SMA Unklab. This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the significance of the principal's transformational leadership style on teacher motivation in adapting to the philosophy and approach of the Independent Curriculum at SMA Unklab. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model which includes data reduction, presentation, and extracting meaning. Data validity was guaranteed through triangulation of sources and methods to obtain an authentic understanding of the role of the principal's leadership as a driver of teacher motivation and adaptation in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The results show that the principal's leadership at SMA Unklab plays a significant role in increasing teacher motivation to adapt to the philosophy and approach of the Independent Curriculum. The principal acts as an inspirational figure who is open to new ideas and is able to build a collaborative work culture in the school environment. Through consistent role models and support, teachers feel valued and encouraged to innovate in the learning process. Leadership oriented towards the values of togetherness and the spirit of change strengthens teachers' professionalism and commitment to realizing meaningful and independent learning.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Changes in the national education paradigm towards Independent Curriculum marks a new chapter in the world of Indonesian education (Mulyasa, 2023). This curriculum was born as a concrete

manifestation of the philosophy Free to Learn Promoted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The core essence of this change is to provide freedom and independence to educational institutions, teachers, and students to develop contextual, meaningful, and student-centered learning processes. The Independent Curriculum focuses not only on delivering material but also on developing the competencies, character, and profile of Pancasila students who are devout, critical thinkers, creative, independent, collaborative, and globally diverse.

However, this curriculum transformation also brings big challenge for teachers. They are required to be able to adapt to new philosophies and approaches that emphasize differentiated learning, diagnostic assessment, as well as Pancasila student profile strengthening project (P5) (Nasrudin, Prasetyo, Nastain, Mukaromah, & Fathoni, 2025). The shift in the teacher's role from merely delivering material to facilitator of learning demands high levels of pedagogical competence, creativity, and reflective skills. Many teachers initially felt awkward and overwhelmed as they had to adapt to new teaching tools, project-based learning strategies, and the use of digital technology in the learning process. This situation demonstrates that the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum depends not only on the curriculum design itself, but also on the teachers' readiness and motivation to implement it.

It is in this context that, principal leadership has a very important role. The principal is not only an administrative manager, but also agent of change whose job is to foster enthusiasm, direct vision, and create a school environment that supports innovation. One leadership style considered most relevant in facing this era of change is transformational leadership (Fathoni, 2025; NOR & SURIANSYAH, 2024; Utami, Hariawan, & SUHARDI, 2024). This leadership style emphasizes role modeling, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individual attention to subordinates. Principals with a transformational leadership style not only provide instructions but also build emotional and motivational relationships with teachers, thereby fostering a sense of ownership of the school's shared vision.

Transformational leaders strive to influence teachers to see change not as a threat, but as an opportunity for growth. Through role modeling and moral encouragement, principals can create a reflective, collaborative, and learning-oriented culture that fosters meaningful learning. When teachers feel valued, given space to experiment, and supported in the learning process, their motivation to adapt and innovate significantly increases. Therefore, understanding the meaning of transformational leadership style for teacher motivation becomes a very important thing to study.

This research stems from the need to explore in depth how principals' transformational leadership practices can influence teachers' enthusiasm and readiness to adapt to the philosophy and approach of the Independent Curriculum. Through a deeper understanding of this meaning, it is hoped that effective leadership patterns can be identified to build teachers' intrinsic motivation, create a school culture that is adaptive to change, and strengthen the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in a sustainable and meaningful manner.

Initial observations at Unklab Adventist Lab School indicate that the school has been implementing the Independent Curriculum since 2022, incorporating various learning innovations developed by teachers. The principal plays a central role in fostering this adaptation through a participatory, open, and inspiring leadership style. The school's work environment appears conducive and collaborative, with teachers demonstrating a strong enthusiasm for learning and a willingness to innovate in developing project-based and differentiated learning strategies. However, differences in teacher readiness levels in understanding the philosophy and approach of the Independent Curriculum remain, indicating the need for strengthened motivation and ongoing support from the principal to ensure optimal adaptation.

Many previous studies have discussed the relationship between transformational leadership style and teacher work motivation in general, but there are still few studies that highlight the meaning of the principal's transformational leadership style in the context of adaptation to the Independent Curriculum. Most research focuses on quantitative aspects such as influence or correlation, while a deep understanding of how teachers interpret the principal's leadership style in the process of educational change is rarely examined phenomenologically. This gap forms the essential basis for this research, which

explores the dimensions of meaning, experience, and emotional impact of transformational leadership on teacher motivation amidst the dynamics of the Independent Curriculum implementation.

The novelty of this research lies in its approach which focuses on subjective meaning and direct experience of teachers towards the principal's transformational leadership in the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum. This research examines leadership not only as a managerial style, but also as a process of shaping teachers' motivation, meaning, and professional commitment through inspiring and humanistic interactions. Furthermore, this research contributes to enriching Indonesian education literature by presenting an in-depth, qualitative, phenomenological perspective on the dynamics of school leadership in the Independent Curriculum era.

This research is relevant to the government's efforts to strengthen the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which demands adaptive, collaborative, and transformative school leadership. The research findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of educational leadership studies, particularly in the context of national curriculum transformation. Practically, these findings are important for school principals, teachers, and policymakers to understand how transformational leadership can be a determining factor in building teacher motivation, confidence, and readiness for change. This study aims to understand the meaning of the principal's transformational leadership style for teacher motivation in adapting to the philosophy and approach of the Independent Curriculum at Unklab Adventist Lab School.

## 2. METHODS

This research used qualitative approach with phenomenological research type, which aims to deeply understand the significance of the principal's transformational leadership style on teacher motivation in adapting to the philosophy and approach of the Independent Curriculum (Pahleviannur et al., 2022; Salam, 2023). The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to directly explore the subjective experiences of teachers and principals, thus uncovering the essence of the meaning of leadership and motivational events that occur in the school environment. The research was conducted in SMA Unklab, one of the leading private schools in North Minahasa Regency which has implemented the Independent Curriculum in stages since 2022. The research subjects consisted of the principal and several teachers from various fields of study selected purposively, with the consideration that they have direct involvement in the implementation process of the Independent Curriculum and can provide relevant information regarding the principal's leadership style and its impact on teacher work motivation.

The data collection technique is carried out through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews were used to obtain informants' personal perspectives and experiences on how the principal's leadership influences their enthusiasm and motivation for teaching. Observations were conducted to directly observe interactions between the principal and teachers during reflection activities, meetings, and classroom learning. Meanwhile, documentation was used to trace various written and visual evidence such as meeting minutes, workshop schedules, teacher reflection sheets, and school work plans that demonstrate the direction of leadership policies.

Data analysis was performed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or meaning. In the data reduction stage, researchers select and focus data relevant to the research objectives. Next, in the data presentation stage, the results of interviews, observations, and documentation are organized into a thematic narrative so that the patterns of relationships between findings can be clearly seen. The final stage is the extraction of meaning or the essence of the phenomenon, where researchers seek to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of the principal's transformational leadership style for teacher motivation. To ensure data validity, this research used triangulation of sources and methods. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from the principal, teachers, and school documents to ensure data consistency. Method triangulation was conducted by combining interview results, observations, and documentation to obtain a comprehensive and valid picture. Through these approaches and procedures, this research is expected to yield an authentic understanding of how the

principal's transformational leadership can be a driving force for teachers to meaningfully internalize and implement the spirit of the Independent Curriculum.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### Results

SMA Unklab is one of the leading private schools in North Minahasa Regency. Since 2022, the Independent Curriculum has been gradually implemented. The school is led by a visionary principal who is known to have an open, inspiring and change-oriented leadership character. The school has 24 teachers with diverse age backgrounds and teaching experience, from young teachers under 30 years old to senior teachers who have taught for more than twenty years.

In the context of the transition to the Independent Curriculum, teachers at this school face significant challenges, ranging from adapting to new teaching tools, competency-based assessments, to implementing...Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). The results of in-depth interviews with the principal and several teachers showed that the transformational leadership style was evident in the way the principal built a shared vision and fostered a spirit of change. Several teachers described the principal as a role model in implementing the Independent Curriculum. An English language teacher A, said:

"The principal always arrived early, even before the other teachers. He often sat in on the class to see how we tried new approaches. From that, we felt motivated that if the principal was willing to learn, let alone us."

Another teacher added that the principal not only gave instructions, but also demonstrated real actions.

"He helped develop our first teaching module, provided input, and even tried teaching in class. We saw that as a role model," (Teacher B).

Through this example, the principal instills the values of change as part of a shared moral commitment, not just an administrative demand.

The principal consistently instilled optimism that curriculum change was an opportunity, not a burden. In an interview, teacher C said:

"I always tell teachers, don't be afraid of the Independent Curriculum. We're not being asked to work harder, but to do more meaningful work."

This quote has become a source of inspiration for many teachers. Teacher D, said:

"We often feel overwhelmed by new terms. But every time he holds a meeting, the atmosphere is different: not scolding, but encouraging and encouraging."

This inspirational motivation gives rise to a sense of self-confidence in teachers to experiment and innovate in learning, even though they are initially hesitant.

The principal gives teachers space to try new things without fear of making mistakes. Teacher E, explained:

"He never imposed a particular method. We were given the freedom to create projects or learning strategies that suited our students' personalities. If we failed, he'd say, 'It's okay, the important thing is that we learn.'"

In addition, the school principal also routinely holds learning reflection forum every month, where teachers share their good practices and difficulties in implementing the Independent Curriculum. Through these activities, a healthy culture of discussion and reflection emerges, where teachers feel safe to share their ideas and challenges.

Interview results showed that the principal has a personal relationship with the teachers. He understands their individual characteristics, potential, and challenges. Teacher F, said:

"I was struggling to put together a teaching module, and he came into my room, sat with me, and guided me without being patronizing. That made me feel valued."

This personalized approach makes teachers feel cared for and motivated. They work not just out of obligation, but because they feel part of a larger process of change.

Observations were conducted during several teacher meetings and learning activities. Observations revealed that the principal consistently attended weekly reflection sessions and actively listened to teachers' input. The atmosphere of the meetings tended to be dialogue-based rather than instructional. Teachers appeared enthusiastic about sharing their experiences.

In daily learning activities, it appears that teachers at SMA Unklab have strived to adapt their teaching approaches to student characteristics and needs, in line with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum. Observations indicate a variety of learning strategies that reflect teacher autonomy and creativity in developing learning activities.

In Biology lessons, for example, the teacher implements project-based learning (project-based learning) with the topic school environment. In this activity, students were invited to observe the condition of the school garden, research the types of plants growing there, and write a simple report on environmental conservation efforts. The teacher acted as a facilitator, guiding the discussion and exploration process. Students were enthusiastic about working in small groups, bringing simple measuring tools, and sharing roles. From this activity, students not only understood the concept of ecosystems but also developed a sense of concern for the cleanliness of the school environment.

Meanwhile, in Indonesian language lessons, teachers provide students with more space to determine their own learning direction. Teachers give students the freedom to choose literary or non-literary texts that they like to analyze, whether in the form of short stories, poetry, or popular articles. The classroom atmosphere was lively as each group chose a different topic. One group analyzed a short story by Ahmad Tohari, while another examined an article on local culture. The teacher circulated, providing guidance, asking for students' opinions, and motivating them to express their interpretations. This approach provided a meaningful learning experience for students because they felt their opinions were valued and the learning process was more tailored to their individual interests.

In contrast to these two subjects, the history teacher chose to use project-based digital approach, where students are invited to create timeline digital about the local history of North Minahasa. Students were asked to explore historical sources from regional archives, interviews with community leaders, and old photographic documentation. All work was collected in the form of a interactive timeline using a simple online application. This activity not only improves students' historical thinking skills but also fosters a sense of pride in their regional identity. The teacher patiently assists each group, provides feedback, and ensures that each student has a role in the process. During the activity, the principal was present and directly motivated the students and teachers. He offered verbal appreciation, such as, "Your work is amazing! This is proof that learning can be fun." This expression fosters pride and enthusiasm among teachers.

A review of various school documents reveals concrete evidence supporting the principal's implementation of a transformational leadership style at SMA Unklab. These documents are not merely administrative in nature, but also reflect policy direction and leadership spirit focused on developing teacher capacity and improving the quality of student-centered learning.

One of the documents that stands out is minutes of internal school meetings. It records various directives from the principal emphasizing the importance of collaboration between teachers as the primary foundation for strengthening the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The principal consistently encouraged teachers to share good practices through reflection forums and regular discussions. The minutes also included a decision to establish a teacher learning community cross-subject, facilitated directly by school management. These records demonstrate that the principal's leadership is oriented toward collective development, not just individual performance.

In addition, activity documentation also shows that there is internal workshop schedule which are compiled periodically. The training materials focus on important topics in the Independent Curriculum, such as differentiated learning and diagnostic assessment. This workshop is designed with a participatory pattern, where teachers are not only participants but also facilitators for their colleagues. This

demonstrates the existence of a form of intellectual stimulation, where the principal fosters a culture of mutual learning and motivates teachers to play an active role in the professional development process.

Other evidence that supports the application of transformational leadership is seen in teacher reflection sheet. This document contains teachers' personal accounts of the learning process and the changes they experienced after participating in various mentoring activities. Many teachers reported increased confidence in designing instruction tailored to students' needs. Some even expressed that they are now more willing to try new approaches without fear of failure, as they feel fully supported by the principal. The reflection sheets illustrate a shift in motivation from simply fulfilling obligations to a desire for professional development.

Further, there is also Photo documentation of Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) activities and teacher training held at the school. The photos demonstrate the close interaction between the principal and teachers, where the principal not only supervises the activities but is also directly involved in the mentoring and appreciation of the teachers' and students' work. The principal's presence at each activity serves as a tangible symbol of support that strengthens teachers' motivation.

From the results of the analysis of school work plan 2024–2025, it appears that the school's policy direction is closely aligned with the philosophy of the Independent Curriculum. The document outlines a strong and inspiring vision:

“To be a school that empowers teachers and students to learn happily and meaningfully.”

This vision statement demonstrates that the principal not only emphasizes the administrative aspects of education, but also prioritizes the humanistic values of happiness, meaning, and independent learning. This vision is a reflection of inspirational motivation owned by the principal, where all elements of the school are invited to move together towards a higher goal: building a liberating educational ecosystem.

### **Discussion**

Based on the results of research conducted at SMA Unklab, it can be seen that the principal applies a leadership style that is in line with the concept transformational leadership as stated by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass and Avolio (1994) (Abun, Basilio, Magallanes, Quadra, & Encarnacion, 2020; Harsoyo, 2022; Ilhami & Fathoni, 2025; Jadidah, 2025; Nasukah & Maunah, 2021; Sihombing, Saputra, & Yani, 2024). In this context, the principal plays a role not merely as an administrative controller, but as a figure who inspires, guides, and fosters a spirit of change among teachers.

In general, the leadership practices demonstrated in this school show the presence of the four main dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Wen, Ho, Kelana, Othman, & Syed, 2019). Principals serve as moral and professional role models for teachers through exemplary behavior, direct involvement in learning activities, and active participation in the development of teaching materials. The presence of a leader who is truly involved fosters teachers' respect and trust in the direction of school policy. From the perspective of inspirational motivation, the principal plays a crucial role in instilling optimism and meaning in the curriculum changes. He emphasized that implementing the Independent Curriculum is not merely an administrative obligation, but rather an opportunity to rediscover the essence of liberating learning. This perspective creates a positive work environment and fosters enthusiasm among teachers to continue innovating in the classroom.

Furthermore, intellectual stimulation is evident in the principal's efforts to encourage teachers to experiment with different learning strategies. Teachers are given the space to try various approaches tailored to student characteristics, whether through project-based learning, interest-based approaches, or the integration of technology into learning activities. This situation demonstrates an academic climate open to new ideas and a continuous process of reflection, in accordance with the principle put forward by Bass & Avolio that transformational leaders foster creativity and the courage to take positive risks. Individual attention The principal's commitment to teaching is also very prominent. The principal strives to understand the needs and potential of each teacher by providing personal guidance, opportunities for self-development through training, and moral support when facing difficulties. This level of attention makes teachers feel valued and motivated to contribute more optimally to the school's progress.

From the perspective work motivation theory, these conditions show conformity with the view McClelland (1987) regarding the need for achievement, affiliation, and power. Teachers at this school showed an increased drive to achieve and a desire to collaborate due to the support and recognition from the principal (Afifah, 2025). Meanwhile, when linked to the theory Herzberg (1959), the principal's leadership does not only fulfill the factors hygiene such as harmonious working relationships, but also creates motivator factors in the form of opportunities for development, recognition, and a sense of professional responsibility between (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Özsoy, 2019).

In context Self-Determination Theory, the leadership implemented at SMA Unklab also supports the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs of teachers: autonomy, competence, And relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2024). Teachers are given the freedom to innovate (autonomy), facilitated through training and workshops that strengthen their competencies (competence), and fostered in a warm and collaborative work environment (relatedness). Fulfilling these three aspects strengthens teachers' intrinsic motivation to continuously adapt and improve the quality of learning.

School documentation findings reinforce this picture. Meeting minutes, workshop schedules, teacher reflection sheets, and documentation of P5 activities and teacher leader training demonstrate the principal's systematic efforts to create a participatory and visionary work environment. The school's vision, as outlined in the 2024–2025 work plan, is even... "To be a school that empowers teachers and students to learn happily and meaningfully", demonstrating the integration between the philosophy of the Independent Curriculum and the practice of transformational leadership.

This context illustrates how the principal is not only a policy implementer, but also an agent of change who brings values to life. Free to Learn daily school life (Fauzi, 2022; Nasrudin et al., 2025; Purnawanto, 2023). Such leadership fosters a reflective, collaborative, and innovative culture, ultimately contributing to increased teacher motivation and readiness to face curriculum changes. Field data demonstrates a strong alignment between transformational leadership theory and the principal's leadership practices at SMA Unklab. The leader acts as a driver of change who not only directs but also inspires and empowers, enabling the meaning of transformational leadership to be truly realized in an educational context oriented toward learning freedom.

Research conducted at SMA Unklab shows that the principal's leadership plays a crucial role in building teacher enthusiasm and motivation in adapting to the philosophy and approach of the Independent Curriculum. The principal emerged as a figure capable of fostering self-confidence, opening up dialogue, and encouraging changes in the school's work culture. In his daily life, the principal demonstrated an open and inclusive attitude. He frequently attended various teacher activities, both formal and informal, to provide support and encouragement. Whenever a new policy was introduced, he did not immediately issue orders but instead engaged teachers in discussions to understand the meaning and purpose of the change. This approach made teachers feel involved and valued in the decision-making process, fostering a harmonious and collaborative work environment. The principal also actively initiated professional development activities for teachers. Through internal workshops, joint reflection sessions, and sharing of best practices, teachers were encouraged to develop learning methods tailored to student characteristics. These programs better prepared teachers to meet the demands of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes differentiated and student-centered learning.

In the implementation of learning, it is apparent that teachers are beginning to implement more varied and contextual approaches. Some teachers are developing project-based learning with a school environment theme, others are giving students the opportunity to choose materials based on their interests, and still others are utilizing digital media to enrich the learning experience. All of these innovations stem from the principal's encouragement to provide freedom to experiment and learn from the process, rather than solely focusing on the end result. Furthermore, the relationship between the principal and teachers is very well established. The principal often provides personal attention to teachers who need support, both professionally and personally. He not only provides direction but also listens and helps find solutions together. This attitude fosters a sense of comfort and trust among teachers, which in turn increases their work motivation.

The work environment at SMA Unklab also appears to be increasingly positive. Teachers feel more open to sharing ideas and experiences, while collaboration between teachers has intensified. Meetings and school activities have transformed into forums for mutual learning, rather than mere administrative activities. Teachers have demonstrated enthusiasm for participating in training, reflection, and self-development activities. Institutionally, the school has demonstrated a clear direction in supporting the Independent Curriculum philosophy. The school's planning documents and work programs reflect a vision that emphasizes happiness, meaning, and freedom in learning. This vision is not only written on paper but is also reflected in various school activities, such as projects to strengthen the Pancasila student profile, teacher leadership training, and learning reflections.

The implications of this research indicate that the principal's transformational leadership plays a strategic role in strengthening teachers' readiness and motivation to face educational change, particularly in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The principal's exemplary behavior, emotional support, and open communication foster a collaborative and reflective work culture. This encourages teachers to be more confident, creative, and adaptive in designing student-centered learning. Therefore, inspirational and empowering leadership is key to building a school environment that empowers teachers to learn, experiment, and develop professionally. Practical implications: principals are expected to act not only as administrative managers but also as learning leaders capable of fostering a spirit of change and building a powerful and meaningful educational ecosystem.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The research findings indicate that the principal's leadership at SMA Unklab plays a significant role in fostering teacher motivation to adapt to the philosophy and approach of the Independent Curriculum. The principal emerges as an inspiring figure, open to new ideas, and able to create a collaborative work environment. Through exemplary behavior, personal support, and shared reflection, teachers feel valued and encouraged to innovate in their learning. The school climate becomes more positive and dynamic, with teachers free to experiment with strategies that suit their students' characteristics. This leadership, which emphasizes the values of togetherness, meaningful learning, and a spirit of change, not only enhances teachers' professionalism but also strengthens their commitment to realizing meaningful learning in accordance with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum.

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