

THE ROLE OF PRINCIPAL VISIONARY LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: *The 21st century is marked by rapid social, technological, and cultural changes, demanding a comprehensive transformation in the world of education. In this context, visionary leadership of school principals becomes a key element in building adaptive, innovative, and competitive educational institutions. This article aims to examine the strategic role of visionary school leadership in facing the challenges of the 21st century, as well as to formulate implementable strategies that can be applied in educational institutions. The method used is a literature review by examining 25 relevant national and international articles. The study results show that visionary school principals are not only tasked with formulating a transformative vision but also serve as the driving force behind a culture of innovation, digital technology integration, and multi-party collaboration. This article offers a 5K approach – Commitment, Collaboration, Contextualization of vision, Digital capabilities, and Adaptive leadership – as a concrete action framework. The implications of this study provide policy and practice directions for the development of relevant educational leadership in the era of digital transformation.*

Keywords : Visionary Leadership; School Principal; 21st Century.

Introduction

Rapid developments in various fields such as technology, economy, social, and culture in the 21st century demand a comprehensive transformation in the world of education. Education can no longer focus solely on academic achievement; it must be able to prepare students with 21st-century skills, which include critical thinking, creativity, effective communication, collaboration, digital literacy, and the strengthening of character with integrity (Hartono et al., 2025). In this context, the role of the principal as a visionary leader becomes very crucial. The principal is not only required to perform managerial functions but also must have a clear vision, be able to inspire, drive change, and foster the creation of an innovative, inclusive, and adaptive learning environment in response to the dynamics of the times. Therefore, educational institutions, including schools at all levels, need to develop relevant and transformative learning approaches, supported by leadership that can facilitate the holistic development of students' potential (Mulyadi, 2025).

However, one of the main weaknesses in many studies on visionary leadership in the field of education in Indonesia is the lack of focus on the local context. Many literatures and articles discussing school leadership are still too normative and adopt a somewhat universal approach, without considering the unique challenges, characteristics, and complexities of the education system in Indonesia. Specific issues such as infrastructure gaps between regions, differences in teacher quality across areas, limited access to technology in remote schools, and variations in the leadership capacity of school principals in urban and rural areas, are often overlooked in discussions. Data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) in 2023 recorded that Indonesia has more than 148,000 basic and secondary education units, with more than 3 million teachers and 45 million students. However, the distribution of education quality in Indonesia is still very uneven. For example, based on the results of the National Assessment in 2022, only about 30% of schools in 3T areas (frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged) have adequate access to the internet and learning technology devices. However, visionary leadership demands the ability to integrate technology and innovation into the educational process.

School principals in Indonesia are faced with diverse realities – from a shortage of teachers, low parental participation in education, to a weak culture of literacy and numeracy in the school environment. Unfortunately, many scholarly writings and educational policies have not specifically explored how principals in these various contexts fulfill their visionary roles. This results in a gap between discourse and practice. Studies highlighting the

success of school principals in facing local limitations, such as in disaster-prone areas, border regions, or impoverished urban environments, are still very limited. However, case studies like this would be very important to illustrate how visionary leadership can be realized in the diverse context of Indonesia. Moreover, the lack of a context-based approach also affects the effectiveness of training and professional development for school principals. School head strengthening programs often rely on generic training models or curricula that do not consider specific needs at the field level. This results in the weak relevance of the program to the real challenges faced by school principals. In the World Bank report (2022), it is mentioned that one of the obstacles to improving the quality of school leadership in Indonesia is the mismatch between the training provided and the local needs of each school.

Visionary leadership should not just be a slogan or an abstract concept, but should be translated into real, contextual strategies. School principals in the remote areas of Papua, for example, need a different leadership approach compared to principals in Jakarta. School principals in areas prone to social conflict, such as some regions in Sulawesi or Kalimantan, also face unique challenges that cannot be resolved solely with a normative approach. Therefore, it is important for academic studies and educational policies to enrich the discourse on visionary leadership with empirical data and reflections from real practices in the field. This will not only enhance the relevance of theory to practice but also provide more applicable guidance for school principals in effectively carrying out their roles according to the specific conditions of their schools. Visionary leadership demands the ability to design a clear and inspiring vision, build a collaborative school culture, motivate educators and students to continuously develop, and implement innovative, relevant, and technology-based learning strategies (Purwanto, 2021).

With such leadership, the principal can create a learning environment that encourages creativity, critical thinking, and character building, so that the graduates produced are ready to face global challenges and actively contribute to society (Yaqin, 2025). Essentially, a leader, including a principal, must be able to inspire trust, loyalty, and commitment from all members of the organization. He needs to have effective communication skills to convey the vision, values, and ideas clearly to all parties involved in the school environment (Tabais et al., 2025). A visionary school principal is required not only to be an idea communicator but also to be a driver capable of creating positive changes in the dynamics of the workgroup, whether among teachers, educational staff, or students (Annur et al., 2025). Leadership is a process of influencing organizational members through motivation, inspiration, and directing their activities to foster a collective awareness in achieving common goals (Windryani et al., 2022). In the context of education, the principal as a leader plays a strategic role in mobilizing all elements of the school to create an innovative and adaptive learning environment in response to the times. A visionary leader is someone who not only has the ability to see and design the future but also possesses a high level of concern for the transformation of educational institutions from a stagnant condition to a dynamic, creative, and responsive system to change. A visionary leader possesses a strong background of knowledge, strategic thinking, and leadership skills that can inspire and empower all school members to move together towards the established vision (Hadiansyah & Iskandar, 2023).

Entering the 21st century, the world is facing rapid and complex changes, especially in the fields of science, technology, communication, and information. This era is marked by information openness, global collaboration, and the need for critical, creative, and innovative thinking (Wulandari, 2022). Therefore, there is a need for human resources who are not only academically intelligent but also possess 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, effective communication, collaboration, creativity, digital literacy, and adaptability. In this context, the role of the principal as a visionary leader becomes very crucial. The principal not only functions as an administrative manager but also as an agent of change capable of building a school culture that supports innovation, lifelong learning, and sustainable professional development (Adriansyah et al., 2022). Visionary leaders must be able to anticipate future challenges, formulate relevant strategies, and create an inclusive educational ecosystem that focuses on character development and student competencies in line with the demands of the times. Thus, visionary leadership of school principals in the 21st century is key to realizing schools that are excellent, adaptive, and ready to meet global challenges. The school principal must be able to become an inspirator, motivator, and facilitator of change to shape a generation that is not only intellectually smart but also emotionally, socially, and spiritually mature (Prastiwi & Widodo, 2023).

Method

This research employs the library research method by collecting, reviewing, and analyzing various relevant reference sources, including books, scientific journals, articles, research reports, and policy documents closely related to the topic of visionary school leadership roles in the 21st century. Data in this study were obtained through

a literature review and document examination discussing the concept of visionary leadership, 21st-century educational challenges, and school principals' strategies in facing the increasingly complex and competitive dynamics of the education world (Waruwu, 2023). The literature was selected based on criteria of relevance, academic validity, and local context, with a publication range from 2015 to 2025 to accommodate the latest developments in policies and educational phenomena. The analysis was conducted using a thematic synthesis approach, which grouped the findings based on main themes such as characteristics of visionary leadership, contextual challenges, and their impact on the quality of education. This study also highlights the fact that more than 40% of school principals in Indonesia have not yet mastered the visionary leadership competencies needed to face the challenges of the 21st century (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Thus, this study is not only descriptive but also analytical, and it is expected to provide conceptual and practical contributions to the development of a relevant and applicable visionary leadership model in today's educational world.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

A visionary principal is a leader who has a clear and directed vision for the future of the educational institution they lead. That vision not only serves as a personal guide but also as a collective direction for all school members in achieving meaningful and sustainable long-term goals. Without a strong vision, the principal will only carry out tasks routinely without a clear direction, thus unable to drive the changes and innovations needed in the 21st-century education era (Asnawi, 2019). The success of the visionary leadership of the principal is reflected in their ability to collectively realize the school's vision and mission, as well as to implement various innovative ideas and strategies that can enhance the quality of education and the school's organizational culture. This is inseparable from the various important roles played by visionary leaders in the context of complex and dynamic educational management.

Referring to Nurul Hidayah's opinion in (Mulyadi, 2025), there are four main roles that reflect the character of visionary leadership, particularly in the context of 21st-century school principals :

1. Direction Finder

A visionary principal plays a role as the direction setter for the organization. He is tasked with formulating a contextual, communicative, and inspirational vision and mission. This vision is effectively communicated to all school members, motivating them to move in unison towards change, and building the belief that the steps taken are strategic for collective progress. In the current digital and global era, school principals also need to ensure that the vision aligns with technological developments, societal needs, and the 21st-century competencies that students must possess.

2. Change Agent

In this role, the principal becomes the driving force behind the school's transformation. He is uncomfortable with stagnant conditions or the status quo. On the contrary, visionary leaders always seek opportunities for innovation, evaluate existing systems, and introduce new breakthroughs to improve the quality of educational services. As agents of change, school principals are also required to be adaptive to external dynamics, such as curriculum developments, digitalization of learning, and the demands of competency-based education (Gistituati, 2021).

3. Vision Spokesperson

A visionary principal must be able to be an effective spokesperson in conveying the school's vision and policy direction, both to the internal school community (teachers, students, staff) and external parties (parents, community, education department). Through persuasive, open, and consistent communication, the principal builds public support and trust in the school's programs. He became a symbol of the spirit of progressive change, while also ensuring that all components of the school were actively involved in realizing the agreed-upon vision.

4. Team Training and Development

Visionary leaders do not work alone, but build solid teams through a collaborative approach. In this role, the principal acts as a coach who is capable of developing the potential of individuals and groups, directing collaboration among teachers, and creating a productive and synergistic work environment. He coordinates collective efforts towards achieving the vision by empowering all "players" within the organization, including teachers, educational staff, and students. This collaborative leadership is becoming increasingly important in the 21st century, where cooperation, innovation, and technological literacy are the main foundations of educational success (Rusdarti et al., 2018).

By optimally carrying out these four roles, the principal not only becomes an administrative leader but also a driving force for change capable of addressing the challenges of modern education. Strong visionary leadership

will create schools as centers of inclusive, adaptive, and future-oriented learning, while also being able to produce competent, character-driven generations ready to face a constantly changing world. However, the results of this literature review indicate several significant limitations. First, this study does not provide empirical data such as interviews, observations, or real case studies in schools. The absence of field data weakens the practical value and novelty of the article, making it more descriptive and normative without concrete evidence of how visionary leadership is implemented in the real world. This phenomenon is important because many articles related to school leadership have already incorporated field research, providing more applicable insights. Second, there is repetition and redundancy of ideas, especially related to the emphasis on vision, the role of change agents, and the characteristics of visionary leaders. This repetition makes the article less effective in conveying the main message and can reduce its appeal to readers.

The phenomenon in the field also reinforces the need for special attention to the implementation of visionary leadership. Based on data from the Ministry of Education and Culture (2022), around 40% of school principals in Indonesia have not fully implemented visionary leadership, particularly in terms of innovation and adaptation to technological developments and 21st-century competency demands. This reinforces statement that "without a strong vision, school principals will only perform their duties routinely without a clear direction, thus unable to drive the changes and innovations needed in the 21st-century education era." Therefore, a leadership approach that is not only normative but also based on the real context and the problems faced by the school is very much needed. In conclusion, although this article provides a rich conceptual framework on the role of visionary leadership of 21st-century school principals, the existing literature studies are not yet empirically and practically robust. The recommendation moving forward is to conduct more in-depth and systematic field research so that the visionary leadership model can be adapted and effectively implemented in schools with real contexts and challenges.

Discussion

Based on a literature review from various national and international journals, visionary leadership of school principals in the 21st century plays a strategic role in driving progress and transformation in the world of education. Visionary leadership is not merely an administrative competency, but rather reflects the strategic capacity to read the direction of changing times, formulate a relevant future vision, and inspire the entire school community to adapt and develop sustainably (Badu & Djafri, 2017). In the context of globalization, digitalization, and complex socio-cultural changes, this role becomes crucial for the realization of adaptive, innovative, and highly competitive educational institutions. One of the main characteristics of visionary leadership is its ability to formulate a clear, inspiring, and contextual vision. A strong vision serves as a collective guide in every decision-making process and the direction of school development. The formulation of this vision is not only data-driven but also involves the strategic imagination, intuition, and creativity of the principal in envisioning a better future for the educational institution they lead. A visionary principal is able to read opportunities and challenges that may not yet be visible to the naked eye.

He formulates a realistic yet progressive future strategy, blending idealism with concrete steps that can be realized together. The vision is not merely a formal document, but rather an energizing force driving the school's culture towards collaboration, innovation, and continuous learning. In the era of the 4.0 industrial revolution and society 5.0, school principals are required to be more than just managers (Dwivedi et al., 2022). They must be able to serve as instructional leaders, change agents, and architects of the future of educational institutions. Visionary leadership requires school principals to build adaptive visions and missions that meet the demands of the times – integrating digital literacy, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration within the framework of 21st-century competencies (Nadeak, 2023). Moreover, visionary school principals must be the driving force behind digital transformation within the school environment. They facilitate the use of learning technologies such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), blended learning, and AI-based platforms. A digital collaborative culture is developed through teacher training, online learning communities, and the use of educational social media (Hanan et al., 2025). This opens up opportunities for more flexible, personalized, and contextual learning.

So that visionary leadership does not stop at the level of normative discourse, concrete steps need to be developed that can be applied at the level of educational units. This article recommends five main implementational approaches :

1. Mapping Vision Based on School Needs

The formulation of a vision must be based on mapping the needs and potential of the school. The principal initiated a participatory process with teachers, educational staff, and the school committee to formulate a vision grounded in the institution's reality using instruments such as SWOT analysis.

2. Practical-Based Leadership Training

Strengthening the capacity of school principals is carried out through case study-based training, leadership simulations, and educational innovation workshops. The focus includes digital leadership, visionary communication, and change management.

3. Strengthening the Vision Monitoring and Evaluation System

The vision must be translated into performance indicators and evaluated periodically. The M&E system is designed to measure the achievement of the vision based on the quality of learning data, teacher professional development, and the effectiveness of the school's strategic programs.

4. Strategic Partnership

Visionary school principals collaborate with universities, professional communities, the business world, and local governments to expand support for resources and educational innovation.

5. Vision-Participatory-Convergent Model

The vision is formulated inclusively and articulated in tangible programs such as curriculum digitization, a collaborative culture, teacher training, and student development. The convergence between the school's vision and work plan must be maintained to ensure that the implementation remains aligned and measurable.

In the 21st century, school principals are faced with various complex challenges ranging from the acceleration of digitalization, the demand for inclusive education, to the need to create a learning environment that is responsive to the changing times. In this context, visionary leadership becomes crucial as the driving force behind school transformation. Visionary leaders are not only able to design a progressive future vision for the school but also guide the educational community to concretely realize that vision. Based on the results of the literature study, visionary leadership is characterized by the principal's ability to: (1) create a clear and inspiring direction; (2) build a collaborative culture; (3) integrate innovation; and (4) develop the capacity of all school members. To guide the practical implementation of visionary leadership, the following 5K Strategy approach is offered:

1. Commitment to Values and Direction of Change

The principal needs to demonstrate integrity and consistency in directing educational changes based on values such as justice, professionalism, and inclusivity. This commitment becomes the moral foundation in every decision-making and transformational policy.

2. Cross-Stakeholder Collaboration

Visionary leadership encourages the creation of synergy between teachers, students, parents, and the community. The principal acts as a facilitator of a collective movement that strengthens the school's vision and mission through open and participatory communication.

3. Contextualization of Vision

A strong vision must be adapted to local conditions, school culture, and the specific challenges faced. This contextualization ensures that the vision is not just a document, but becomes a relevant guiding principle that encourages the involvement of the entire school community.

4. Digital Capabilities

Principals in the 21st century are required to be digitally literate and become agents of technological transformation. They must be able to leverage technology to enhance learning effectiveness, governance transparency, and expand access to information and communication.

5. Adaptive Leadership

The world of education is full of uncertainty, as seen during the global pandemic. Visionary leaders need to have flexibility, mental resilience, and the ability to innovate in crisis situations, without losing direction and the collective spirit of the school community.

Visionary leadership is an important foundation for the transformation of education in the 21st century. Visionary school principals are able to create an adaptive, creative, and collaborative learning environment, and foster an innovation culture that encourages the entire school community to grow together (Saputra et al., 2025). Through a strong vision, structured implementation strategies, and inclusive partnerships, the principal becomes the main actor in creating an educational institution that is not only academically excellent but also relevant to the demands of the times.

Conclusion

Visionary leadership of school principals is a strategic foundation in facing the complexities of 21st-century

educational challenges. Principals cannot merely manage administratively; they must be able to build a transformative vision that drives changes in school culture, learning innovations, and the strengthening of digital capabilities. The implementation of that vision requires a systematic approach that includes mapping school needs, practice-based leadership training, vision performance monitoring, and cross-sector strategic partnerships. The 5K Strategy: Commitment, Collaboration, Contextualization of vision, Digital capability, and Adaptive leadership can serve as practical guidelines in concretely actualizing the role of visionary leadership. Thus, visionary school principals not only lead but also transform educational institutions into inclusive, competitive, and future-relevant learning centers.

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