

Visionary Leadership of School Principals in the Digitalization Era: A Case Study of Cluster V Schools in Panawangan District, Ciamis Regency

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation in primary schools is often constrained by infrastructure gaps and unpreparedness of human resources. This study aims to analyze the role of visionary leadership of school principals in the digitalization era in four dimensions: as designers, problem solvers, role models, and strategies in optimizing training and technology integration for educators in Cluster 5 of Panawangan District, Ciamis Regency. The research method uses a descriptive qualitative approach through case studies. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies. Qualitative data analysis techniques include data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The results of the study show that: (1) As designers, school principals build a digital ecosystem through a shared vision and coding curriculum system; (2) As a problem solver, school principals implement the Identification-Reflection-Improvement (IRB) cycle based on Education Report data to proactively overcome infrastructure and budget constraints; (3) As a model, the principal positions himself as a first learner who inspires teachers through technical examples; (4) The AI integration strategy and peer coaching training "Digital Tuesday" has proven to be effective in overcoming low technology adoption. The conclusion of the study confirms that the effectiveness of visionary leadership is determined by the ability of the principal to align the organization's "software" (vision, systems, culture) with the technological potential of the future.

INTRODUCTION

The digital era of digitalization, driven by the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and Society 5.0, has changed almost all aspects of human life, including the education sector. Today, education is required to adapt to rapid technological changes, changes in the way of learning, and the need for 21st century skills. Schools as formal educational institutions are at the forefront of facing these challenges (Suriyani et al., 2021). The success of schools in adapting depends not only on the availability of technological infrastructure, but also on the readiness of educators and leadership who lead the process.

In the midst of this massive flow of change, the role of the principal has become very central and strategic. The principal is no longer just an administrative manager, but must be a leader who is able to bring about change (Sugiarto, 2025). In accordance with the Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education (Permendikdasmen) Number 7 of 2025 which emphasizes the role of school principals is not just an administrative official but also a leader of strategic learning. According to (Erlena, 2025), the leadership of the principal is the main factor in the success of the school as well as the awareness of the importance of leadership as the key to the success of the school.

In the context of the digital era, the leadership needed is visionary leadership. (Khaulah et al., 2025) Visionary leadership is a leader's ability to create, articulate, and implement a realistic and credible vision of the future for an organization, which goes beyond current conditions.

Based on a preliminary study through observation and interviews with the Supervisor of Cluster 5 Regional Schools on Tuesday, October 7, 2025, at 09.00, the place of the Panawangan District Regional Coordinator room, information was obtained as presented with the following data:

Table 1.1 Initial Survey of Visionary Leadership Levels

No.	Visionary Leadership Role Indicators	Ideal Score	Score Empirical
1	Directional Determinants (Ability to set long-term vision & goals)	100%	75%
2	Perancang (Ability to design strategies & systems to achieve vision)	100%	60%
3	Agents of Change (Ability to lead & manage change/transition)	100%	75%
4	Coach (Ability to develop & guide team/teachers)	100%	75%
5	Motivator (Ability to inspire & motivate the team)	100%	80%
6	Spokesperson (Ability to communicate vision to internal & external)	100%	85%
7	Troubleshooter (Ability to overcome obstacles to vision achievement)	100%	70%

8	Work Above Standards (Shows high personal performance)	100%	80%
9	Model (Panutan) (Be an example & role model in action)	100%	70%
	Average Visionary Leadership Score	100%	74%

Source : School Supervisor

Table 1.2 Initial Survey of Learning Adaptation Levels in the Digital Era

No.	Indicators of Learning Adaptation in the Digital Era	Target	Achievements
1	Accessibility and Flexibility (Students can access learning materials through digitization)	100%	70%
2	Interactive Learning (Lesson hours use interactive media, not passive)	100%	80%
3	Collaboration and Communication (Student projects are done using a collaborative platform)	100%	70%
4	Uses of AI and Educational Analytics (Adoption of adaptive/ AI-based learning platforms)	100%	30%
5	Ethical and Security Challenges (Implementation of SOP on Data Security & Student Privacy)	100%	80%
6	Teacher Training and Technology Integration (Teachers pass digital pedagogy training)	100%	50%
7	Strengthening Technology Infrastructure (The school has adequate WiFi & device ratios)	100%	85%
Average		100%	66,85%

Source : School Supervisor

Meanwhile, data on learning adaptation in the digital era showed an average achievement of 66.85%, which indicates a transition phase towards digital transformation. Physically, the school has had excellent readiness with a score of 85% on the aspect of strengthening technological infrastructure, including the availability of WiFi and digital devices. The readiness of this infrastructure is also in line with the implementation of interactive media as well as the ethics and data security system which has reached 80% (Monigir, 2025).

Although the physical infrastructure (hardware) is adequate, this study reveals serious challenges to the capacity of human resources (brainware) and the use of advanced technologies (Saptadi et al., 2025). The indicators of teacher training and technology integration only reach 50%, which means that only half of educators have digital pedagogy qualifications. This condition is directly proportional to the low level of use of AI and educational analytics which is the lowest score, which is only 30%. Overall, this empirical data shows that the main obstacle in optimizing digital technology in schools does not lie in facilities, but in the readiness of human resources to adopt cutting-edge technology (Sulaiman, 2026).

The research conducted has a novelty from previous research conducted by Annisa and Muttaqin with the title "Research on Building the Future of Education: The Role of Visionary Leadership in Improving the Quality of Education", from this study has not examined the role of visionary leadership of school principals as designers, problem solvers, and models in facing the digitalization era. And the novelty of the research lies in the use of AI and educational analytics. Previous research only discussed integrating technology in general in the educational process carried out by (Agustín et al., 2025). So this research is very relevant to the technology trends in 2025-2026 that are being hotly discussed in the world of education.

Based on the preliminary study, it was concluded that the ability of some school principals to develop and implement visionary leadership that is adaptive to the development of digitalization is not optimal. This is not just a technical problem, but the core of various issues that hinder the readiness of the early generation in this era of digitalization. So this research has the following research objectives:

1. Analyzing the role of visionary leadership of school principals as designers in the digitalization era
2. Analyzing the role of visionary leadership of school principals as problem solvers in the digitalization era
3. Analyzing the role of visionary leadership of school principals as role models in the digitalization era
4. Analyze the principal's visionary leadership strategy in overcoming the low adoption of AI (Artificial Intelligence) technology and educational analytics, as well as optimizing training programs and technology integration for educators

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital transformation in education is a process of integrating digital technology into all aspects of the education system to improve the quality of learning, administrative efficiency, and readiness of students to face the digital era (Damayanti et al., 2024). At the elementary school level, this transformation faces more complex challenges, especially related to limited infrastructure and human resource (HR) readiness (Ali, 2025).

Several studies show that the digital divide is still a major obstacle in the implementation of education technology in the regions, including limited access to devices, internet networks, and policy support (Dimas & Fahlevvi, 2024). In addition, the low digital literacy of teachers is a major inhibiting factor in the adoption of technology, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) in learning (Slamet et al., 2025)

METHODOLOGY

The research method used is descriptive with a qualitative approach that aims to analyze the visionary leadership of school principals in the era of digitalization in elementary schools in group V, Panawangan District, Ciamis Regency. Data was collected through interviews, observations, and documentation with informants consisting of Principals, Supervisors, and

Teachers. Data analysis is carried out through three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation (data display), and conclusion drawing or verification and for data validity through data triangulation.

Refers to (Nurrisa & Hermina, 2025), this research process is carried out through several stages. First, the pre-field stage which includes the preparation of a research design and the determination of locations and informants. Second, the stage of conducting research in the field by conducting observations, interviews, and collecting related documents. Third, the data analysis stage by selecting, presenting, and interpreting data according to the focus of the research. Fourth, the stage of drawing conclusions as a result of research findings. Fifth, the stage of preparing research reports as the final form of the entire series of activities.

The stages of research can be described in figure 1:

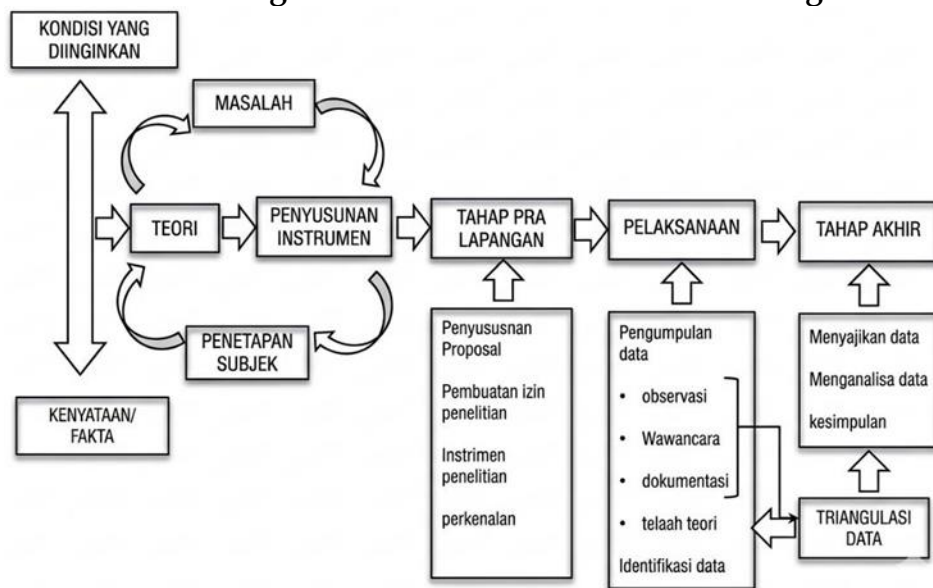


Figure 1

This research scheme describes a systematic flow that begins with the identification of gaps between ideal conditions and reality in order to formulate the problems studied through theory and subject determination in the preparation of instruments, then continues with the pre-field stage which includes administrative preparation to location introduction. In the implementation stage, the researcher collects data through observation, interviews, and documentation accompanied by a data triangulation process to validate the validity of the findings through cross-checking between various sources and techniques before finally entering the final stage for presentation, analysis, and credible conclusions.

RESEARCH RESULT

The visionary leadership of school principals as designers in the digital era, as found in Group V, Panawangan District, Ciamis Regency, shows the transformation of the role of school principals in building organizational foundations that are adaptive to technological changes. Refers to thoughts (Japar et al., 2023), this role includes three main dimensions, namely Shared Vision Design, Systems Thinking Design, and Learning Organization Development. In

this context, the principal does not impose a top-down vision, but builds it through collaborative dialogue, as seen in the vision of "Lensa Neliga" at SDN 5 Gardujaya and the literacy focus at SDN 4 Sadapaingan which has succeeded in fostering a sense of ownership among teachers. This is in line with (Warman et al., 2024) which emphasizes that the commitment of school residents is born from involvement in vision exploration. In addition, the principles of systems thinking are reflected in the integration of digital policies that do not stand alone, such as the incorporation of the coding curriculum with Wi-Fi facilities at SDN 5 and the "Digital Offline" innovation at SDN 3 as a solution to infrastructure limitations. On the other hand, school principals also succeed in creating an environment that supports continuous learning by building a safe culture for teachers to experiment with technology, so that the technology paradigm shifts from a threat to a means of improving quality, as affirmed by (Suheri, 2025).

In his role as a problem solver, the visionary leadership of school principals in the digitalization era shows a shift from an intuitive approach to a data-driven decision-making approach. The problem identification process is carried out by utilizing the Education Report Card as the main instrument to accurately map obstacles, which is in line with the theory (Sulistyo et al., 2024) regarding the importance of proper problem definition in producing effective solutions. Furthermore, the principal implements the Identification-Reflection-Improvement (IRB) cycle which involves the IT team and teachers as the main actors in the analysis and implementation of solutions, so that the decisions taken are collective and fact-based. This approach reinforces the findings (Hadi, 2025) on the importance of collaboration in education reform. In addition, the strategic courage of the school principal can be seen in the decision to prioritize the BOS Performance budget on IT infrastructure development over short-term consumptive needs. This process is strengthened by routine monitoring and coaching activities as stated by (Paizaluddin et al., 2025), which contributes to creating a culture of continuous improvement in the school environment.

The role of school principals as role models in visionary leadership in the digital era is also an important factor in the success of educational transformation. Based on social learning theory (Firmansyah et al., 2024), the principal positions himself as a "first learner" who directly influences the teacher's behavior through the process of observation and imitation. The ability of the principal to operate technology such as the Interactive Flat Panel (IFP) is able to attract the attention of teachers and encourage the internalization of values (retention), such as the moral message that "digital data is a mandate of worship" at SDN 5 Gardujaya which forms an integrity-based work ethics standard (Yudistira & Sindo, 2025). Furthermore, the process of reproduction and motivation can be seen from the tendency of teachers to imitate the calm attitude of leaders in facing technical obstacles and are motivated by the success of the school in achieving achievements and support for BOS Performance funds. This strengthens the view (Dwiwarman, 2025), that the authority of leaders in the digital era is not only determined by technical abilities (hard skills), but also by integrity and exemplary (soft skills).

The principal's visionary leadership strategy in transforming AI-based learning and digital pedagogy in the three schools includes five main pillars that focus on human resource development. First, visionary accountability is realized through budget allocation for official certification of coding and AI for teachers as a form of strengthening professionalism in line with the concept of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Second, adaptive leadership is reflected in the use of open learning resources such as the GTK Room at SDN 4, which allows the implementation of digital vision even with budget limitations, thus emphasizing the importance of political will of leaders. Third, the peer coaching strategy through the "Digital Tuesday" forum has proven to be effective in reducing the resistance of teachers, especially senior teachers, through a collaborative approach as stated by (Muntu, 2026). Fourth, the reconstruction of the role of teachers through the use of AI as a "smart assistant" can reduce administrative burdens by up to 50%, so that teachers can focus more on the pedagogical and emotional aspects of students, as supported by the findings (Henukh et al., 2025). Fifth, synergies between AI and hardware such as the offline use of AI content executed through IFP demonstrate high adaptivity in overcoming infrastructure limitations, while creating a more interactive, participatory, and inclusive learning experience.

Table 1. A Brief Analysis of the Role of Visionary Leadership

Role Dimensions	Key Findings in the Field	Theory/Reference Basics
Designer	Designing a collective vision, coding system, and adaptive learning culture.	Senge (1990), A. Brent (2003)
Problem Solver	Use of Education Report Card (PBD) and the IRB cycle transparently.	Robbins & Judge (2017), Hemmen (2009)
Role Model	Become the first learner in use of IFP and AI.	Bandura (1977), Nanus (2001)
Strategy Transformasi	AI Certification, <i>Peer Coaching</i> , and AI-based administrative efficiency.	Zachariah (2025), Paramita (2025)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the success of digital transformation in elementary schools is not solely determined by the availability of technology, but by the quality of leadership that is able to orchestrate systemic change. In this context, the visionary leadership of the principal serves as a catalyst that connects the strategic vision, readiness of human resources, and the use of technology in a contextual manner. This reinforces the view that digital transformation of education is a socio-technical process, not just the adoption of digital devices.

From a theoretical perspective, the role of the principal as a designer shows that effective educational leadership in the digital era must be able to move from a structural approach to a systemic approach. The integration

between vision, curriculum, and infrastructure reflects the application of systems thinking that is not only oriented towards short-term solutions, but also organizational sustainability. These findings expand the concept (Iriani et al., 2025) By showing that in the context of elementary schools, systems thinking operates not only at the policy level, but also on local adaptation to limitations, such as innovation based on infrastructure conditions. Thus, the design of an effective educational organization is one that is flexible, contextual, and oriented towards collective learning.

Furthermore, the shift in leadership patterns in problem solving from intuition to data-based shows a paradigm transformation in school management. This marks a transition to an evidence-based leadership model, where strategic decisions are based on structured data analysis. However, the use of data does not stand alone, but rather is strengthened by reflective and collaborative processes. In other words, data becomes a tool for initiating professional dialogue, not just a control instrument. These findings contribute to the literature by confirming that the effectiveness of data-driven decision-making is highly dependent on an organizational culture that supports openness, reflection, and collective participation.

In the exemplary dimension, the results of the study show that the legitimacy of leadership in the digital era no longer only comes from formal authority, but from the competence and personal credibility of leaders in adopting technology. This indicates a shift in the source of power from positional power to expert and referent power. Within the framework of Bandura's theory, the modeling process carried out by school principals not only results in imitation behavior, but also forms new norms in the organization. Thus, digital exemplification serves as a mechanism for internalizing the culture of innovation, which in the long run can accelerate the diffusion of technology in the school environment.

In addition, teacher capacity building strategies based on collaboration and hands-on practice show that traditional approaches in teacher training are no longer adequate to deal with the complexity of digital transformation. Peer coaching and community-based learning models have proven to be more effective in overcoming resistance to change, as they leverage social closeness and trust between individuals. This is in line with social learning and community of practice theory, which emphasizes that professional learning occurs optimally in the context of meaningful social interaction. Thus, digital transformation requires not only increasing individual competencies, but also reconstructing the teacher's learning ecosystem.

On the other hand, the use of AI in the context of basic education shows significant potential in improving teachers' work efficiency while shifting the focus of their role towards a more humanistic function. Reduced administrative burden provides space for teachers to strengthen pedagogical and emotional interactions with students. However, it also requires ethical and professional readiness in the use of technology, including awareness of data accuracy, privacy, and moral responsibility. Therefore, the integration of AI in education cannot be separated from a strong digital ethical framework.

Interestingly, this study also shows that infrastructure limitations are not always the main obstacle in digital transformation, as long as there is adaptive and innovative leadership. This challenges the common assumption in the literature that tends to place technology as a key prerequisite for transformation. On the contrary, these findings confirm that creativity in the use of existing resources is actually a differentiating factor in success. In other words, effective digital transformation is more determined by mindset and strategy than just the completeness of facilities.

Overall, this discussion led to an understanding that the success of visionary leadership in the digital era lies in the ability of school principals to align three main dimensions, namely the technological dimension (technology), the people dimension (people), and the organizational dimension (process). The imbalance between these three aspects has the potential to hinder transformation. Therefore, a holistic and integrative approach is key in building an adaptive, innovative, and sustainable school in the digital era.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that the visionary leadership of school principals in Cluster V of Panawangan District is the main foundation in encouraging school transformation in the digital era. School principals not only focus on providing technological infrastructure, but are able to design a collaborative shared vision, build an organizational system that is integrated between technology and curriculum, and create an adaptive and sustainable learning organization. This shows that the digitalization of education is positioned as a long-term structural change, not just a momentary trend. In addition, the role of school principals as problem solvers has shifted to a more proactive and data-driven approach through the use of Education Report Cards and the Beneficial Reflection Identification (IRB) cycle, thus enabling more accurate strategic decision-making in overcoming infrastructure and human resource challenges.

On the other hand, the principal also functions as a "first learner" who provides an example through mastery of technology and moral integrity, so as to be able to increase the self-efficacy of teachers and encourage the emergence of intrinsic motivation to innovate. The transformation strategy implemented emphasizes strengthening human resources through accountability for funding for competency development, adaptive leadership under limited conditions, the implementation of peer coaching through collaborative forums, and the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in learning. The use of AI as a "smart assistant" has been proven to be effective in significantly reducing the administrative burden on teachers, so that teachers can focus more on their role as learning facilitators who develop students' cognitive and emotional aspects personally.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Based on the findings and limitations of this research, there are a number of opportunities for the development of advanced research that can enrich the study of visionary leadership in the digital transformation of basic education. First, further research needs to examine more deeply the causal relationship between the visionary leadership of school principals and the improvement of student outcomes, both in cognitive, affective, and 21st century skill aspects. The study can use a mixed methods or quantitative approach with a longitudinal design to measure the long-term impact of the implementation of digital strategies, including the integration of AI in learning.

Second, further exploration is needed on the effectiveness of the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the context of basic education, especially in supporting personalized learning and student character development. Research can be focused on how AI not only improves administrative efficiency, but also contributes to the quality of pedagogical interaction between teachers and students. In addition, ethical aspects of the use of AI, such as data privacy, algorithm bias, and critical digital literacy, are important areas that need to be comprehensively studied.

Third, follow-up research can develop a contextual leadership model based on local contextual leadership that takes into account infrastructure limitations, organizational culture, and regional characteristics. It is important to produce a model that is not generic, but adaptive to school conditions in areas with limited resources. Comparative studies between regions or between levels of education can also provide a broader perspective on the variety of digital leadership practices.

Fourth, it is necessary to conduct research on the dynamics of changing the culture of school organizations in the digital transformation process, especially related to teacher resistance, adaptation patterns, and mechanisms for forming professional learning communities. Ethnographic approaches or phenomenological studies can be used to explore teachers' subjective experiences in the face of technological change, thereby providing a deeper understanding of psychological and social factors in the adoption of innovation.

Fifth, the next research can examine the effectiveness of the teacher professional development model based on peer coaching and community of practice in improving digital competence in a sustainable manner. The research focus can be directed to the identification of key success factors, such as facilitative leadership, trust between teachers, and institutional policy support.

Overall, this advanced research agenda is expected not only to strengthen the theoretical foundation in the field of digital education leadership, but also to make a practical contribution in designing more inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable education transformation policies and strategies in the era of artificial intelligence.

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