

## Visionary Leadership Styles of School Principals in the Era of Independent Learning: Challenges and Implementation Strategies

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### ABSTRACT

Under the Merdeka Belajar national policy, the high school principal implements a visionary leadership style. To implement Merdeka Belajar, school leaders must drive change, foster an adaptive educational vision, and innovate learning. The main issues are the discrepancy between the expectations of the Merdeka Belajar policy and the school's conventional managerial practices, as well as the challenges of mobilizing High School 3 Gowa's teaching and education staff to support this vision of change. This study aims to (1) describe the principal of the high school visionary leadership model within the Merdeka Belajar framework, (2) identify internal and external challenges to implementing this vision, and (3) formulate specific strategies the principal has used to overcome these challenges and encourage school transformation. This qualitative study adopts a single-case study strategy. In-depth interviews with the principal, vice principal, and teacher representatives; Merdeka Belajar implementation documentation; and direct observation of High School 3 Gowa activities collected data. This study found that the principal at High School 3 Gowa's visionary leadership style was realized through open collaboration, teacher autonomy in curriculum design, and digital technology to accelerate the vision. The key hurdles included senior instructors' initial opposition, insufficient resources for new training, and the need to improve digital literacy. A core change team (Agent of Change) and teacher coaching were the main implementation techniques. This study provides an empirical model and examples of best practices for visionary leadership at a specific educational unit level to help high school principals and Indonesian high school principals succeed with Merdeka Belajar.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a key pillar in developing a nation's human resources. Senior high schools play a crucial role as a bridge between basic education and higher education or the world of work (Walid et al., 2024). A high school's success is determined by the

principal's leadership style, the curriculum's quality, and the teachers' competence (Pardosi & Utari, 2022; Yalçinkaya et al., 2021). In this context, the principal is the helmsman who controls the direction and goals of the institution. Strong and directed leadership can create a positive school culture, increase teacher professional motivation, and ultimately boost student academic and non-academic achievement (Hayati & Abidin, 2023; Massouti et al., 2024).

However, the dynamics of the educational environment continue to change with technological, social, and policy developments (Wang et al., 2024). These changes require school leaders to move beyond being mere administrative managers focused on daily routines to become strategic leaders capable of anticipating the future and leading transformational change. This shift in roles underpins the importance of further exploring effective leadership models, particularly amidst the wave of educational reform in Indonesia (Sain et al., 2024).

Over the past few years, Indonesia's national education system has entered a new era, marked by the launch of the Merdeka Belajar policy by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Rosadi & Mun'amah, 2023). The core philosophy of Merdeka Belajar is to provide greater autonomy and flexibility to educational units to design curricula and learning processes relevant to local contexts and student needs (Damayanti, 2025; Munawar, 2022). This concept fundamentally shifts the educational paradigm from a centralized and uniform one to a more diverse and student-centered one.

The implementation of Merdeka Belajar requires several significant adjustments, including: (1) Flexible Curriculum: Teachers are encouraged to design learning modules tailored to their students' learning pace and interests (Hadi et al., 2023). (2) Teacher Empowerment: Teachers act as agents of change and facilitators with the professional freedom to innovate (Haq, 2024). (3) Culture of Innovation: Schools must become laboratories where new ideas are tested and developed (Pratiwi, 2025). (4) Community Engagement: The role of parents and communities in supporting the educational process is increasingly enhanced (Halimah et al., 2025).

This massive transition places school principals in a highly strategic and vulnerable position. They are no longer merely policy implementers but must become architects who translate the vision of Merdeka Belajar into daily practice in their schools. Without adaptive and strong leadership, Merdeka Belajar risks becoming merely policy jargon without real, transformative impact on the ground (Syakur, 2025; Umami & Wahyudi, 2025).

The most relevant and necessary leadership style to navigate the complexities of Merdeka Belajar is visionary leadership. Visionary leadership is defined as a leader's ability to create, articulate, and inspire commitment to a realistic, credible, and compelling vision of the future for organizational members (Hermawan et al., 2024; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Liliana & Almuhajir, 2025). In the high school context, principals must formulate an ideal image of high school graduates who not only excel academically but also possess Pancasila-based character and 21st-century competencies (Rakhmawati et al., 2024; Sanjani, 2024). The vision must be communicated

consistently and convincingly to all stakeholders (teachers, staff, students, and parents) so that they understand their respective roles in achieving it. Principals must be role models who can motivate teachers to step out of their comfort zones, dare to innovate, and take responsibility for the autonomy granted by Merdeka Belajar (Rahmalinda et al., 2025; Saputra et al., 2023).

However, implementing visionary leadership faces many internal and external challenges (Candrasari et al., 2023). Internally, these challenges include resistance to change from senior teachers who have long used traditional methods, limited professional capacity for teachers to adopt new technology and curriculum, and a work culture that remains hierarchical and non-collaborative. Externally, challenges can include limited regional budgets, parental support that does not fully understand the Merdeka Belajar concept, and unequal digital infrastructure.

To understand the dynamics of visionary leadership in practice, a focused and contextualized case study is necessary. This research selected High School 3 Gowa in Gowa, South Sulawesi, as the study location. This location selection assumed that schools in buffer zones often face unique challenges in terms of resource allocation, infrastructure readiness, and heterogeneity of student socioeconomic backgrounds, compared to schools in urban centers.

High School 3 Gowa represents an educational institution struggling to balance national quality demands (Merdeka Belajar) with local wisdom and limited resources. Therefore, the leadership practices of the principal at High School 3 Gowa are not simply a replication of a centralized leadership model but rather the result of adaptation and formulation of unique strategies relevant to the local context. This case study will explore how the principal makes sense of Merdeka Belajar, formulates a specific school vision, and mobilizes the school community through the challenges.

Although numerous scholarly publications discuss Freedom to Learn and visionary leadership (Harizal et al., 2024; Haryanti & Saerozi, 2024; Hermawan et al., 2024), most of the available literature suffers from two major limitations: (1) Macro-General Nature: Many studies are national surveys or general policy studies, thus failing to capture the complexities and nuances of implementation at the specific educational unit level. They tend to identify challenges in general terms without offering practical, field-tested solutions. (2) Lack of Local Representation: Research is often dominated by studies of leading schools or large urban areas, thus making it difficult to understand how school leaders in areas with limited resources and diverse cultural contexts successfully create transformation (Amay & Pakaya, 2025; Sulistyowati & Wicaksono, 2025).

This research uses an intrinsic case study approach at High School 3 Gowa. This means the research aims to provide both a rich description and a thorough analysis of the leadership practices of a single principal during a specific time (the Freedom to Learn Era) and at a specific location. This focus allows for the discovery of contextual and purposeful leadership strategies, which are often overlooked in quantitative research or large-scale surveys. This research aims to formulate a series of best practices developed by the principal, for example, in managing conflict and resistance from senior teachers, utilizing local wisdom in the curriculum, or collaborating with the Gowa

regional government to address resource constraints. These strategies provide more relevant practical guidance that can be emulated by principals in other regions or schools with similar characteristics.

Theoretically, this research contributes by developing a conceptual model of visionary leadership for independent learning based on local context. This model will map the elements of visionary leadership that can be effectively modified or adapted to the real-world conditions of High School 3 Gowa, thereby enriching educational leadership theory, which has tended to be universalistic and inadequately consider Indonesia's contextual diversity. Given the urgency of the Independent Learning reform, the demands on the principal's role as a visionary leader (Candrasari et al., 2023; Mas & Zulystiawati, 2022), and the gap in research at the specific educational unit level, this research is relevant. Through an in-depth case study of High School 3 Gowa, this article will not only outline challenges but, more importantly, present practical solutions and effective implementation strategies. This paper is expected to make a significant contribution both to the development of educational leadership science and to improving the quality of educational practices throughout Indonesia.

## 2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic single-case study. The qualitative approach was chosen because it aims to provide a deep and contextual understanding of a complex social phenomenon, namely the implementation of a visionary leadership style within the specific context of the Independent Learning Era at a single institution. The intrinsic case study was chosen because its primary focus was to gain a rich and comprehensive understanding of a specific single case, namely the dynamics occurring at High School 3 Gowa. Figure 1 presents the case study model used in this research.



**Figure 1.** Case Study Design

The research location was High School 3 Gowa, Gowa Regency, South Sulawesi. This location was selected purposively because High School 3 Gowa is considered an institution actively implementing the Merdeka Belajar policy and is led by a principal with a track record of driving innovation and change. Research subjects (key

informants) were selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques to ensure rich and comprehensive data collection. Key informants consisted of:

1. The principal: As the primary subject implementing visionary leadership.
2. The Vice Principal for Curriculum: As the party directly responsible for the implementation of Merdeka Belajar.
3. Core Teachers/Leading Teachers (3): Representing agents of change who interact directly with the principal and experience the impact of visionary leadership.
4. Educational Personnel/Administrative Staff (1): To provide perspective on the impact of leadership on the managerial and administrative aspects of the school.

The data collection technique used was triangulation, a combination of three main methods to verify and enrich information:

1. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all key informants. The interviews focused on the principal's vision and mission regarding Independent Learning, the decision-making and resource allocation processes, specific challenges faced in leading change, and strategies used to overcome resistance and encourage teacher collaboration.

2. Limited Participatory Observation

Observations were conducted throughout the research process. Observations focused on the principal's interactions with teachers, staff, and students (e.g., during meetings, workshops, or routine activities), the school culture and work environment at High School 3 Gowa, and the implementation process of Independent Learning programs in the classroom and at the school.

3. Documentation Study

This study involved the collection and analysis of relevant internal school documents, including the school's Medium-Term Work Plan (RKJM) and Annual Work Plan (RKT), the Educational Unit Operational Curriculum Document (KOSP) or Independent Curriculum, the School Self-Evaluation Report (EDS) and school achievement data, as well as internal policy documents issued by the principal.

The data was analyzed using a qualitative data analysis model based on Miles and Huberman ([Houghton et al., 2015](#)), which consists of three interactive activity streams:

1. Data Reduction

Raw data collected from interviews, observations, and documents were selected, sorted, and focused on key themes relevant to the research questions (Visionary Leadership Style, Challenges, and Implementation Strategies in the Merdeka Belajar Era).

2. Data Display

The reduced data was presented in narrative, matrix, or flowchart form to facilitate understanding and identification of patterns of relationships between the research variables.

### 3. Conclusion Drawing (Verification)

Conclusion drawing is carried out in stages by verifying findings in the field. This process involves confirming and triangulating data across sources and methods to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the research findings, the techniques of Source Triangulation and Method Triangulation are used.

1. Source Triangulation: Comparing information obtained from the principal with information from Core Teachers and Administrative Staff.
2. Method Triangulation: Ensuring that interview findings are supported by observations and document analysis (for example, collaboration strategies mentioned in the principal's interview should be reflected in meeting minutes and observed activities).

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

This study presents comprehensive findings regarding the implementation of a Visionary Leadership style by the Principal of High School 3 Gowa in the Merdeka Belajar Era. This includes a description of the leadership model, the challenges faced, and successful implementation strategies.

#### **Visionary Leadership Model of the Principal of High School 3 Gowa**

The visionary leadership model of the Principal of High School 3 Gowa is realized through three main pillars that align with the demands of Merdeka Belajar.

#### ***Pillar 1: Articulation of a Student-Centered Vision***

The principal (KS) successfully articulated a school vision that is not solely oriented toward academic achievement but explicitly emphasizes the Formation of a Pancasila Student Profile and the development of 21st-century competencies. Interview Results (Principal):

*"Our vision is not just to produce graduates with high grades, but graduates who possess 'resilience'—the ability to adapt, empathize, and dare to innovate. We always discuss this vision in every teacher's meeting; it is not just posted on the wall but must be infused into every teaching module."*

Observation Results: A visualization of the school's vision was found in the form of a simple mind map displayed in the teachers' lounge, not just in the principal's office. Teacher coordination meetings were repeatedly opened with an emphasis on the philosophy of "Teachers as Facilitators" and "Students as Learning Subjects," indicating consistent vision articulation.

**Pillar 2: Teacher Empowerment and Professional Autonomy**

Visionary leadership is demonstrated by granting teachers significant autonomy in designing and implementing the Independent Curriculum (Curriculum). This aims to encourage creativity and ownership. Interview Results (Vice Principal for Curriculum):

*"Previously, everything had to be uniform. Now, the Principal gives subject teachers space to be creative in P5 (Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project). He always says, 'I believe you are experts in your field. Show us your best innovations.' This makes teachers feel valued and motivated."*

Documentation Results: Analysis of the Operational Curriculum (KOSP) documents of High School 3 Gowa revealed a rich variety in the themes and types of P5 projects proposed by subject teacher groups, demonstrating decentralized curriculum decision-making.

**Pillar 3: Culture of Collaboration and Open Innovation**

The principal leads by building a collaborative ecosystem, where failure is seen as part of the learning process. This is the essence of visionary leadership to encourage innovation. Interview Results (Core Teacher):

*"Previously, we were afraid to try new methods for fear of being judged by our superiors as failures. Now, the Principal often holds weekly 'Sharing Good Practices' forums. If something fails, we discuss why, not who is at fault. This has significantly changed the way we view innovation."*

Observation Results: Regular 'Teaching Design Discussions' were observed in the teacher's lounge, led by rotating teachers, not always by the principal. This demonstrates that collaboration and instructional leadership have been distributed.

**Specific Challenges in Implementing Merdeka Belajar**

Although a visionary leadership model has been implemented, there are several specific challenges facing SMA Negeri 3 Gowa in this era of transformation:

**Resistance from Senior Teachers**

The main challenge is the resistance or reluctance to adapt from a small number of senior teachers who are comfortable with old (traditional) teaching methods. Interview Results (Senior Teacher):

*"Merdeka Belajar has too many new theories. I've been teaching for over 20 years, and the old methods have proven effective. Having to change all the P5 formats is very tiring and takes up extra time outside of teaching hours."*

***Limited Digital Infrastructure and Financial Support***

High School 3 Gowa still faces challenges in providing adequate ICT (Information and Communication Technology) facilities to support Merdeka Belajar digital projects. Interview Results (Administrative Staff):

*"We lack enough projectors and computers for all classes. Although the principal is visionary and wants to utilize technology, our school operational budget (BOS) requires us to prioritize other basic needs. This is a real obstacle to realizing our digital vision."*

***Difficulties in Parental Involvement***

Changing parents' perceptions from focusing solely on final grades to understanding student character development and competencies remains a challenge in Gowa.

Observation Results: Parent attendance at the Merdeka Curriculum and P5 socialization sessions tended to be lower than at report card distribution, indicating the need for improved communication strategies with parents.

***Effective Visionary Implementation Strategy***

The principal of High School 3 Gowa responded to this challenge with an adaptive and focused implementation strategy:

***Individual Coaching and Mentoring Strategy***

To overcome senior teacher resistance, the principal does not use a directive approach, but instead utilizes a personalized, individual coaching model. Interview Results (Principal):

*"For teachers who are resistant, we don't force them. We provide personal support. I appoint successful, leading teachers to mentor these senior teachers. This approach is more effective because they feel supported, not judged."*

***Formation of a Core Team for Change (Agents of Change)***

The principal formed a small team of young and energetic teachers (Agents of Change) tasked with leading the initial implementation of the Independent Curriculum. This team was fully supported and served as a model for success.

Documentation Results: A Principal's Decree regarding the formation of a "Digital Learning Innovation Team" consisting of five teachers with the specific task of developing technology-based teaching modules demonstrates the institutionalization of this strategy.

***Utilization of Community Resources (Local Networks)***

To address budget constraints, the principal implemented a networking strategy by leveraging community and alumni resources. Interview Results (Core Teacher):



*"When we lacked equipment for a science project, the principal contacted an alumni association working at a mining company in Makassar. As a result, we received donations of simple laboratory equipment and even professional resource people for student projects."*

Overall, the Visionary Leadership Style of the Principal of High School 3 Gowa was successfully implemented with strong adaptation to the context of Independent Learning and the local challenges of Gowa. This leadership is characterized by an articulated vision, teacher empowerment, and a focus on a culture of innovation. The successful implementation was supported by adaptive strategies, particularly the personal coaching approach and the use of local networks, which proved effective in bridging the gap between national policy demands and the reality of resources in schools.

## **Discussion**

This discussion section integrates the findings from High School 3 Gowa into the theoretical framework of visionary leadership and the Merdeka Curriculum. It also discusses practical implications and compares them with previous research.

### **Synchronization of Visionary Leadership and the Merdeka Learning Philosophy**

The findings of this study confirm that the visionary leadership style of the principal of High School 3 Gowa is a fundamental prerequisite for the successful implementation of the Merdeka Belajar program. Visionary leadership is seen not only as the ability to define the future, but also as the power to articulate and inspire commitment to radical change in learning (George, 2024).

The main pillars of visionary leadership at High School 3 Gowa, namely Student-Centered Vision Articulation and Teacher Empowerment, align closely with the core principles of Merdeka Belajar, which emphasize teacher autonomy and relevant learning. The vision, which focuses on the resilience (adaptation and innovation) of graduates, as expressed by the principal, demonstrates success in translating the abstract concept of the Pancasila Student Profile into an operational narrative understood by the entire school community. This supports Hallinger and Heck's (2010) argument that a school leader's impact on student outcomes is often mediated through their influence on teacher professional capacity and school culture.

### **Implementing Visionary Leadership as a Change Agent**

The principal of High School 3 Gowa acted as an effective change agent, particularly in overcoming organizational inertia. Findings regarding the development of a Culture of Collaboration and Open Innovation at High School 3 Gowa indicate that the principal successfully mitigated the fear of failure culture, which is often the biggest obstacle in traditional educational institutions. By embracing failure as a topic for discussion and learning, the principal created the psychological safety essential for teachers to

experiment with new methods in accordance with the demands of the Independent Curriculum.

This strategy distinguishes the visionary leadership identified in this study from pure transformational leadership. Rather than simply providing inspiration, the principal actively created structural mechanisms (a 'Sharing Good Practices' forum and a core change team) to institutionalize these innovations, aligning with the concept of distributed instructional leadership.

### **Analysis of Challenges and Effectiveness of Local Strategies**

The challenges faced by High School 3 Gowa, such as Resistance from Senior Teachers and Limited Digital Infrastructure, are common in educational reform. However, the novelty of this research lies in the effectiveness of the local Adaptive Implementation Strategy used to address them.

### ***Overcoming Resistance with Coaching***

The use of Individual Coaching and Mentoring Strategies to overcome senior teacher resistance is an important finding. This demonstrates that in educational settings, a personal and supportive approach (coaching model) is far superior to a directive or coercive approach. This strategy emphasizes building professional capacity and self-confidence, rather than mere compliance, which are hallmarks of servant leadership applied within a visionary framework.

### ***Solving Resource Limitations through Networking***

The strategy of utilizing community resources (local networking) to address limited funding demonstrates the principal's ability to think strategically beyond the constraints of the school budget. In buffer zones like Gowa, relying on alumni networks and local communities is an innovative survival and growth strategy, emphasizing the role of school heads as community leaders in addition to instructional leaders. This strategy underscores the importance of social capital in successful school management, particularly in areas with limited funding (Beausaert et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024).

### **Comparison with Previous Literature**

These findings strengthen and extend previous research (e.g., Acton, 2021; Alsharija & Watters, 2021; Khaleel et al., 2021) suggesting that principals should be agents of change. However, this study presents specific empirical evidence on how being a change agent is implemented in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the micro-level:

1. Key Differentiators: While general literature often suggests developing a vision, this study demonstrates that individual coaching mechanisms and the institutionalization of a core change team are practical and fundamental steps that bridge the gap between vision and implementation in Gowa.

2. Local Context Relevance: Other research might focus on urban schools with abundant resources. The findings from High School 3 Gowa provide a more relevant model for schools in Eastern Indonesia or other regions facing resource constraints.

### **Research Implications**

The implications of this study are significant for three key stakeholders:

1. Principals: These findings provide a practical framework on how to combine visionary leadership with coaching and networking techniques to achieve the goals of Independent Learning.
2. Regional Policymakers: This study recommends the need for more focused resource allocation on leadership training oriented towards coaching skills and network development, rather than solely administrative training.
3. Educational Institutions: This research can be used as case study material in prospective school principal education programs and the Teacher Leader program regarding the successful implementation of reform policies under limited resources.

Overall, this study concludes that visionary leadership in the Merdeka Belajar Era is not merely rhetoric, but rather a series of strategic, adaptive, and contextual actions successfully implemented by the principal of High School 3 Gowa to create sustainable educational transformation.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The principal of High School 3 Gowa's leadership style is an adaptive visionary one, successfully translating the Merdeka Belajar philosophy into three clear operational pillars: articulation of a student-centered vision/Pancasila Student Profile, teacher empowerment through professional autonomy, and creation of a culture of collaboration and open innovation. This vision serves as a roadmap that drives all components of the school. The implementation of visionary leadership faces major challenges, both internal (resistance from senior teachers) and external (limited digital infrastructure and financial support). These challenges require a specific and personalized approach to overcome. The principal's success in overcoming challenges is achieved through adaptive and local strategies, namely (1) being effective in overcoming senior teacher resistance on a personal level, prioritizing support over coercion. (2) Institutionalization of a Core Change Team (Agent of Change): Serves as a catalyst to initiate and gradually disseminate innovation. (3) Utilization of Community Resources (Local Networks): A smart strategy to overcome budget and infrastructure limitations by involving alumni and local stakeholders. This research demonstrates that visionary leadership at High School 3 Gowa is not merely policy rhetoric but rather a practice institutionalized through supportive and collaborative working mechanisms, making it the best practice for other schools in similar circumstances.

As a recommendation, the principal is advised to continuously improve their individual coaching and mentoring skills. These skills are crucial for navigating change,

mitigating resistance, and sustainably empowering teachers. Teachers are advised to proactively assume the role of agents of change, not waiting for instructions but utilizing the autonomy granted by visionary leadership to innovate in learning. The focus should be on redesigning training and development programs for both current and prospective principals to emphasize visionary and transformational leadership skills, particularly coaching skills, instead of solely concentrating on managerial aspects.

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