



Journal of Educational Sciences

Journal homepage: <https://jes.ejournal.unri.ac.id/index.php/JES>



P-ISSN
2581-1657

E-ISSN
2581-2203

Wetland-Based Transformational Leadership in Building the Image and Competitiveness of Primary Schools

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 04 Jan 2026

Revised: 04 March 2026

Accepted: 25 March 2026

Published online: 05 April 2026

Keywords:

School Image,
School Competitiveness,
Transformational Leadership,
Wetlands,
Primary School

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Article Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.31258/jes.10.4.p.96-111>

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ABSTRACT

Primary schools located in wetland areas face ecological, social, and public perception challenges that may affect their institutional image and competitiveness. This study aims to analyze how transformational leadership contextualized to wetland characteristics contributes to building school image and enhancing the competitiveness of primary schools. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, the study was conducted at Madrasah Diniyah Islamiah Muhammadiyah Kindaung Banjarmasin, a school situated along a riverbank. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving the principal, teachers, parents, and community representatives. The findings indicate that wetland-based transformational leadership is implemented through a contextual vision, ecological role modelling, cultural values, school innovation strategies, and adaptive mentoring of school members. Such leadership plays a crucial role in shaping an authentic school image and strengthening public trust, which in turn contributes to enhanced institutional competitiveness. The study concludes that transformational leadership integrated with ecological contexts can transform environmental constraints into a distinctive identity and strategic advantage for primary schools.

1. Introduction

Leadership has consistently been recognized as a key determinant of school effectiveness, organizational development, and educational quality, particularly at the primary education level. In the context of rapidly changing educational demands, school principals are expected not only to manage teaching and administrative processes but also to act as transformational agents capable of shaping school identity, strengthening stakeholder trust, and enhancing institutional competitiveness. Transformational leadership characterized by visionary influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration

has been widely acknowledged as an effective leadership approach in educational settings (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, much of the existing leadership research continues to emphasize universal or generic models, with limited attention to the ecological, cultural, and geographical contexts in which schools operate.

In Indonesia, a substantial number of primary schools are located in wetland areas, particularly in regions such as Kalimantan, Sumatra, and coastal zones. Wetland environments are characterized by rivers, swamps, tidal areas, seasonal flooding, and distinctive socio-cultural practices that shape the daily lives of local communities. These ecological characteristics present unique challenges for schools, including infrastructure vulnerability, limited accessibility, environmental risks, and persistent public perceptions that associate wetland areas with marginality or lower educational quality. Schools situated along riverbanks face complex structural issues, ranging from inadequate basic facilities and disruptions to learning processes due to seasonal flooding to socio-economic conditions that affect educational participation (Noorhapizah et al., 2025). Nevertheless, wetland contexts do not merely present limitations. These regions also embody rich local wisdom, ecological values, and cultural capital that can serve as strategic resources for educational development. Noorhapizah; et al. (2025) note that using river ecosystems as living laboratories, integrating disaster mitigation education, and fostering school-community collaboration can enhance learning relevance and meaningfulness. These adaptive practices demonstrate the potential of contextualized educational strategies in wetland areas. Within this setting, school leadership requires principals who move beyond administrative roles. Such leaders must act as transformational agents capable of converting ecological challenges into institutional strengths.

Despite the contextual realities of wetland-based primary schools, leadership practices are often analyzed through generalized models that overlook place-based ecological and cultural characteristics, resulting in approaches that are less responsive to environmental challenges and less effective in strengthening schools' public positioning (Harahap & Suriansyah, 2020; Wulandari; et al., 2025). Consequently, many wetland-based schools struggle to build a positive image and compete with schools located in urban or non-wetland areas, even when they demonstrate strong internal performance and a commitment to quality education. This difficulty arises because school leadership has not yet fully succeeded in transforming local contexts into sources of strategic advantage and institutional identity (Begley et al., 2007; Sulaxono & Suriansyah, 2020).

Recent studies increasingly emphasize the importance of contextual and place-based leadership in education. Scholars argue that leadership effectiveness is strongly influenced by the environmental, social, and cultural conditions surrounding educational institutions (Bush, 2009). Empirical findings also indicate that transformational and instructional leadership sensitive to local contexts significantly contributes to organizational climate, teacher commitment, and job satisfaction, which ultimately affect school performance and public perceptions of educational quality (Harahap & Suriansyah, 2020; Sulaxono & Suriansyah, 2020)

When implemented appropriately, transformational leadership has the potential to mobilize school communities, integrate local values into school vision, and convert contextual challenges into strategic advantages for schools (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Numerous studies have demonstrated that transformational leadership enhances teacher commitment, fosters a positive organizational climate, and improves institutional performance and quality through the reinforcement of shared values, vision, and collective participation (Ismaya et al., 2017). However, empirical research explicitly linking transformational leadership with ecological contexts particularly wetland environments remains limited, especially at the primary education level. Most leadership studies in primary schools continue to focus on general or urban contexts and treat the physical and ecological environment as a passive backdrop rather than as a strategic element in leadership practice and school image formation (Setiawan & Aslamiah, 2026).

School image and institutional branding have become critical issues in contemporary educational management, as school image reflects stakeholders' perceptions and emotional responses, while competitiveness represents a school's ability to attract students, gain public trust, sustain partnerships, and maintain program relevance. In primary education, a strong and authentic school image is increasingly important within competitive ecosystems shaped by parental choice, demographic changes, and public accountability. Leadership plays a central role in shaping this image through vision articulation, program innovation, strategic communication, and active engagement with local communities.

Several studies have confirmed that transformational leadership plays a significant role in improving school effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2020). Other research indicates that leadership indirectly strengthens school reputation and competitiveness through innovation and stakeholder engagement. However, most studies focus primarily on urban or mainstream school contexts and rarely explore how ecological settings shape leadership practices and branding strategies. Consequently, the role of transformational leadership rooted in wetland characteristics remains insufficiently examined. Existing school branding research often emphasizes promotional strategies, facilities, and academic achievement. Leadership is seldom acknowledged as a central driver of authentic and sustainable branding, particularly in primary schools located in unique ecological areas. In environmentally distinctive contexts, leadership must integrate local identity into school vision and culture to avoid superficial branding disconnected from community realities. Therefore, research is needed to bridge transformational leadership theory, ecological context, and school branding in wetland-based primary schools, contributing to a more contextualized understanding of educational leadership aligned with place-based education, sustainable development, and culturally responsive leadership.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on transformational leadership explicitly rooted in wetland contexts and its examination of how such leadership shapes school image and institutional competitiveness. Unlike prior research that treats ecological context as a background variable, this study positions wetland characteristics as integral to leadership practice and school identity formation. The

article aims to describe wetland-based transformational leadership practices, values, and strategies in building school image and strengthening primary school competitiveness through the integration of local wisdom into school vision and branding. By doing so, it contributes contextual insights to educational leadership theory and offers practical implications for school leaders and policymakers in environmentally diverse regions.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach to explore how transformational leadership based on wetland characteristics contributes to the development of school image and institutional competitiveness at the primary school level. A qualitative case study design was selected to enable an in-depth examination of leadership practices. The research procedures were designed to ensure transparency, rigor, and replicability. The study was conducted in primary schools located in wetland areas characterized by riverside environments. The schools were selected based on the following criteria: (1) geographic location in a wetland area; (2) continuous leadership by the principal for at least three years and a school history of more than one century; and (3) evidence of school initiatives related to environmental identity or community engagement.

The research site was Madrasah Diniyah Islamiah Muhammadiyah (MDIM) Kindaung Banjarmasin. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving the principal, teachers, parents, and community representatives. The principal served as the key informant, while teachers and parents provided perspectives on leadership practices, school image, and institutional competitiveness.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that the principal's leadership at Madrasah Diniyah Islamiah Muhammadiyah (MDIM) Kindaung Banjarmasin located directly along a riverbank demonstrates transformational leadership that is contextually integrated with wetland characteristics. This leadership has made a significant contribution to shaping a distinctive school image and enhancing institutional competitiveness amid long-standing public perceptions that have tended to disadvantage wetland-based schools. MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin has existed for more than a century under the auspices of the Muhammadiyah socio-religious organization and operates as a formal educational institution under the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

The findings further reveal that wetland-based transformational leadership practices in primary schools are concretely manifested through the integration of transformational leadership dimensions with the distinctive ecological and social contexts of wetland regions. The principal's leadership functions not only as a driver of organizational processes but also as a guide for values, culture, and

institutional identity rooted in the river environment and its surrounding ecosystem. Within the dimension of idealized influence, the principal demonstrates consistent and sustainable ecological leadership role modeling. This is evident in the principal's direct involvement in river environmental stewardship activities, such as maintaining riverbank cleanliness, initiating river-care school programs, and embedding wetland conservation issues into school policies and culture. These practices strengthen the principal's moral legitimacy among teachers, students, and the community, ensuring that ecological values are not merely rhetorical but are internalized in everyday school life.

The inspirational motivation dimension is reflected in the principal's ability to formulate and communicate a contextual and meaningful school vision. The vision of MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin intelligent, moral, high-achieving, and environmentally caring aligns with Bass (2006) assertion that a clear, meaningful, and challenging future vision can foster optimism, commitment, and collective enthusiasm among followers. Wetlands are positioned as a source of school identity and pride rather than as a geographical limitation. This vision is persuasively communicated to all school members, fostering a sense of ownership, optimism, and collective spirit. By positioning wetlands as a distinguishing feature, the principal has successfully constructed a strong institutional narrative that enhances school image and reinforces competitiveness within the dynamic landscape of primary education. Empirically, this finding is consistent with the study by Basuki et al., (2022), which demonstrates that principal leadership that is well-planned, well-organized, and systematically communicated through routine coaching, supervision, and value internalization can enhance teachers' competence and dedication.

The wetland context is positioned as a source of institutional identity and pride rather than as a geographical limitation. This vision is persuasively communicated to all members of the school community, fostering a sense of ownership, optimism, and collective spirit. This is further reinforced by the quantitative findings of Nurohman et al (2025), which reveal that principal leadership has a significant influence on teacher performance, contributing 89.6%, indicating that strong leadership quality directly shapes teachers' motivation and collective performance. By positioning the wetland environment as a distinctive institutional characteristic, the principal has successfully constructed a strategic narrative that not only strengthens school identity but also enhances public image and competitiveness within a dynamic elementary education landscape. Therefore, the dimension of inspirational motivation in transformational leadership functions not merely as an internal psychological driver but also as a strategic instrument for building institutional reputation and sustaining performance over time.

Furthermore, within the intellectual stimulation dimension, the principal promotes long-term and sustainable innovation through contextual learning that utilizes rivers and wetland environments as learning resources. Teachers are encouraged to design learning activities that connect academic concepts with real-life phenomena surrounding students, such as river ecosystems, riverbank economic activities, and wetland-based local wisdom. This practice cultivates a climate of critical and

creative thinking among teachers while increasing the relevance of learning for students. The river is understood not merely as a physical object but as a pedagogical medium rich in contextual meaning. Based on interviews with teachers, it was revealed that the principal's leadership style consistently fosters a work climate that encourages teachers to move beyond administrative routines toward meaningful pedagogical performance, including study programs and activities that fully involve teachers and students. This finding aligns with Rizkie et al. (2022) who argue that high-performing schools are built, in part, through empowering cultures and satisfying work systems.

The first major finding of this study confirms that wetland-based transformational leadership practices in primary schools are realized through leadership that is visionary, contextual, and sustainability-oriented. The principal plays a strategic role in transforming wetland ecological characteristics into sources of value, inspiration, and meaningful educational innovation for the school community. This practice aligns with the transformational leadership framework proposed by Bass and Riggio, which emphasizes idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation as core components of leadership capable of transcending transactional interests and driving meaningful organizational change (Bass, 2006). Consistent with this framework, empirical findings in the Indonesian primary school context demonstrate that principals' transformational leadership has a direct and significant relationship with teacher motivation, organizational commitment, and performance, thereby functioning as a key driver of educational quality improvement (Normianti et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the findings indicate that transformational leadership is expressed through leadership practices that are sensitive to local ecological and social realities. This approach aligns with the view that the effectiveness of transformational leadership is strongly influenced by organizational context, work culture, and the environment in which leadership is enacted. Ismaya et al., (2017) emphasize that transformational leadership practices in educational institutions become more meaningful when the dimensions of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration are contextualized within the local culture and needs of the educational organization. From a quality culture perspective, contextual leadership also plays a critical role in building value systems, collective commitment, and sustainable quality-oriented work cultures through stakeholder engagement and partnerships with surrounding communities (Suriansyah, 2017).

Interview and observational data collected at MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin reveal that the principal does not merely adopt transformational leadership as a normative concept but internalizes it through vision articulation, policy formulation, and daily practices that are contextually aligned with the wetland environment. In-depth interviews indicate a strong congruence between articulated values and lived experiences within the school community. A senior teacher stated, "*Our principal consistently connects school programs with the river ecosystem and local community culture. The vision is not just a slogan; we experience it in daily learning activities.*" This testimony demonstrates the authenticity of leadership practice and

supports Bass and Riggio's (2006) argument that transformational leadership gains legitimacy not solely from structural authority but from alignment between espoused values and followers' lived realities.

Field observations further confirmed that routine school meetings begin with reflections on Islamic values and environmental responsibility, followed by collaborative discussions on programs rooted in the local wetland context, such as river-based environmental literacy projects and community-centered religious initiatives. The principal's leadership style during these meetings was facilitative rather than directive, encouraging deliberation and shared decision-making. These observed behaviors reflect the core dimensions of transformational leadership idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration implemented within a distinctive ecological setting, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic analysis conducted through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding generated the following core categories

Main Theme	Subtheme	Empirical Indicators
Leadership Authenticity	Vision–practice consistency	Religious–ecological vision reflected in curriculum and policy
Contextual Legitimacy	Integration of local values	River-based environmental and cultural programs
Collective Empowerment	Participatory decision-making	Teachers actively involved in planning and evaluation
Institutional Reputation	Intergenerational trust	Alumni and community sustained support

These findings extend the conceptualization of transformational leadership by positioning the ecological context as a source of legitimacy and leadership momentum rather than as a passive background variable. This perspective reinforces the argument that leadership effectiveness is determined by the leader's capacity to construct organizational meaning contextually (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In the educational setting, such practices align with prior findings that transformational leadership enhances teacher performance, job satisfaction, and quality culture within schools (Normianti et al., 2019). Moreover, wetland-based transformational leadership strengthens institutional identity and sustains the school as an adaptive learning organization (Suriansyah, 2017; Senge, 2006). It also contributes to institutional reputation and competitiveness rooted in local wisdom through collective empowerment and continuous quality management practices (Suriansyah et al., 2019; Sulistiyana et al., 2019).

The role of values in transformational leadership is particularly evident in MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin, where the principal consistently models desired behaviors before institutionalizing them as school programs. Religious practices involve not only students but also the principal and teachers, such as faith-building programs conducted through *malam bina iman dan taqwa*. MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin functions not merely as a school management mechanism but as a living value system internalized within the institutional culture. The principal acts as a

transformational agent who integrates Islamic vision, ecological awareness, and wetland-based local wisdom into daily leadership practices, thereby shaping a distinctive, meaningful, and competitive school identity. As an excellent school under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin demonstrates leadership that integrates religiosity, environmental sustainability, and character excellence. Religious routines such as congregational *Dhuha* and *Zuhur* prayers, Qur'an recitation, daily prayers, and moral value integration into learning function not merely as rituals but as mechanisms for cultivating discipline, responsibility, and exemplary character. These practices strengthen the idealized influence dimension of transformational leadership, whereby the leader becomes a moral and spiritual role model trusted and respected by all school members.

Environmental adaptation, school leadership consistently transforms wetland characteristics such as rivers, swamps, and aquatic ecosystems into contextual learning resources and symbols of school identity. The *Adiwiyata* program is not positioned as a purely administrative agenda but as a value driven movement that fosters students' ecological awareness. Environmental maintenance activities, waste management, green space utilization, and wetland based contextual learning reflect intellectual stimulation, encouraging students and teachers to think critically, creatively, and solution oriented in addressing local environmental issues. Furthermore, concern for local culture forms an integral part of transformational leadership at MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin. Banjar cultural values and wetland based local wisdom are integrated into school activities through learning, thematic programs, and daily social interactions. This approach strengthens the community's sense of belonging to the school while building its image as an educational institution that respects local identity amid educational modernization. Social and environmental concern is also evident in school leadership practices. The principal promotes active student involvement in socio-religious activities, environmental action, and programs based on empathy and social solidarity. These practices reflect the individualized consideration dimension, in which each school member is treated as an individual with unique potential, social awareness, and responsibility that must be nurtured sustainably.

Theoretically and empirically, the findings on wetland-based transformational leadership at MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin align with previous studies affirming that principals' transformational leadership significantly influences teacher motivation, organizational commitment, and performance, both directly and indirectly (Normianti et al., 2019). In the MDIM Kindaung context, strengthening the school's image as an excellent Islamic institution that is religious, environmentally caring, and rooted in local culture reflects the role of transformational leadership in shaping collective meaning, values, and identity, thereby enhancing social legitimacy and institutional competitiveness. Moreover, positioning teachers as agents of transformation and custodians of institutional values aligns with Normianti et al. (2019) findings that transformational leadership increases teachers' organizational commitment through motivation and a sense of belonging. At MDIM Kindaung, teacher involvement in decision-making, wetland-based learning innovation, and intergenerational value transmission demonstrates how affective and normative commitment is sustainably cultivated, ensuring that

school continuity does not depend on a single leader but on collective organizational capacity.

Strategic collaboration between MDIM Kindaung and the community, religious leaders, parents, and local stakeholders further reinforces the finding that contextual transformational leadership can build social networks as sources of legitimacy and institutional resilience. This aligns with educational practices in wetland regions that require adaptive leadership grounded in local wisdom, as demonstrated in studies on school development and teacher capacity building in South Kalimantan wetland contexts (Noorhapizah; et al., 2025; Noorhapizah et al., 2023). Such symbiotic collaboration positions the school not merely as a formal educational organization but as a center for moral, religious, and social development within the community. Moreover, the deeply rooted teamwork culture at MDIM Kindaung reflects the implementation of core transformational leadership values trust, collegiality, deliberation, and mutual cooperation which have been empirically shown to contribute to school performance and organizational resilience (Normianti et al., 2019). This institutionalized teamwork ensures that the school's century-long sustainability is the result of value-oriented leadership strategies that are adaptive to changing times and consistent across generations. Thus, the findings from MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin not only reinforce prior research on the effectiveness of transformational leadership but also extend it into a framework of contextual leadership grounded in religiosity, wetland ecology, and local culture. In this context, transformational leadership functions both as a driver of internal school effectiveness and as a strategic approach to building reputation, identity, and sustainable primary school competitiveness in wetland regions.

The study also finds that strengthening strategic communication serves as a crucial instrument in building and maintaining MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin's image as an excellent and historic Islamic school. This aligns with the view that school image is shaped through consistent communication between internal organizational values and external messages received by the public (Pratiwi, Suriansyah, & Aslamiah, 2022; Noorhapizah; et al., 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2025). Internal communication is intensively conducted to unify school members' vision, values, and direction, while external communication is directed toward presenting the school's identity as religious, environmentally caring, and rooted in local culture. As emphasized by Pratiwi & Noorhapizah, (2022), a strong institutional identity emerges from coherence between values, narratives and sustained authentic practices.

Through narratives of the school's long history, consistency in religious values, and social and environmental engagement, MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin has successfully built a strong and positive public image. This image significantly contributes to intergenerational public trust, which serves as the primary capital for school sustainability, as school brand image is formed through historical experience, public trust, and cumulative emotional relationships (Noorhapizah et al., 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2022, 2025). The findings further show that the school's longevity is supported by the adaptive use of science and technology without abandoning institutional identity, consistent with studies indicating that digital technology functions as a strategic medium for expanding school image rather than

replacing core educational values (Puspaningtyas et al., 2022; Sholihah, 2023; Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024)

The use of social media as a public communication channel particularly through Instagram @mdim.kindaug reflects digital branding practices that emphasize the authenticity of school activities and public engagement. This strategy aligns with findings that actively managed and educationally oriented digital media can strengthen positive public perceptions and enhance the competitiveness of primary education institutions in the era of digital transformation (Agusta et al., 2024; D. A. Pratiwi & Sulistiyana2, 2025; Puspaningtyas et al., 2022). Notably, the use of science and technology is not merely imitative but is adapted to wetland contexts and Islamic values. Technology is positioned as a tool to reinforce the educational mission rather than as an end in itself. This strategy enables the school to remain relevant amid digital transformation while preserving continuity of values and historical identity. Based on these findings and observations, MDIM Kindaug Banjarmasin consistently attracts a high number of student applicants, as evidenced by enrollment data, which will be presented in the following section, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Impact of School Image on Institutional Competitiveness

Competitiveness Indicators	Observed Changes	Key Mechanisms
Student Enrolment Interest	Increased	Positive public perception
Community Support	Sustainable partnerships	Trust and engagement
Program Sustainability	Distinctive programs maintained	Collective commitment

Table 2 provides supporting evidence that strengthening school image functions as a strategic link between leadership and institutional competitiveness. These findings explain why wetland-based schools remain competitive, as leadership effectively manages public perceptions through a clear and meaningful institutional identity. The increasing number of applicants each year is reflected in the extended enrolment waiting period, with student registration beginning approximately ten months before the start of the new academic year. Thus, school competitiveness is not determined solely by physical facilities but by an institutional narrative that is trusted by the community.

Conceptually, the relational pathway identified in this study can be synthesized as follows: (1) empirical field data reflecting contextualized leadership practices and value-based communication; (2) categorized into core themes of leadership authenticity, ecological legitimacy, and collective empowerment; (3) linked to the dimensions of transformational leadership idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration; (4) resulting in the construction of a clear and differentiated institutional identity; and (5) ultimately contributing to enhanced public image and institutional competitiveness. This pathway demonstrates that leadership does not exert a direct effect on competitiveness. Rather, its influence is mediated through the construction of shared meaning and perceptions internalized by members of the school community as well as external stakeholders. In this sense, wetland-based leadership transforms

ecological context into symbolic value capital, strengthening the school's strategic positioning within a competitive educational landscape.

The findings of this study confirm that wetland-based transformational leadership is capable of building an authentic school image and enhancing primary school competitiveness. Effective leadership does not rely merely on a transformational style, but rather on the leader's ability to contextualize leadership practices within the ecological and social realities of the school. These findings contribute theoretically to the field of place-based educational leadership and offer practical implications for school principals in wetland regions and areas with similar characteristics. Based on the discussion above, the conceptual model of wetland-based transformational leadership in building school image and primary school competitiveness can be illustrated Figure 1 as follows.

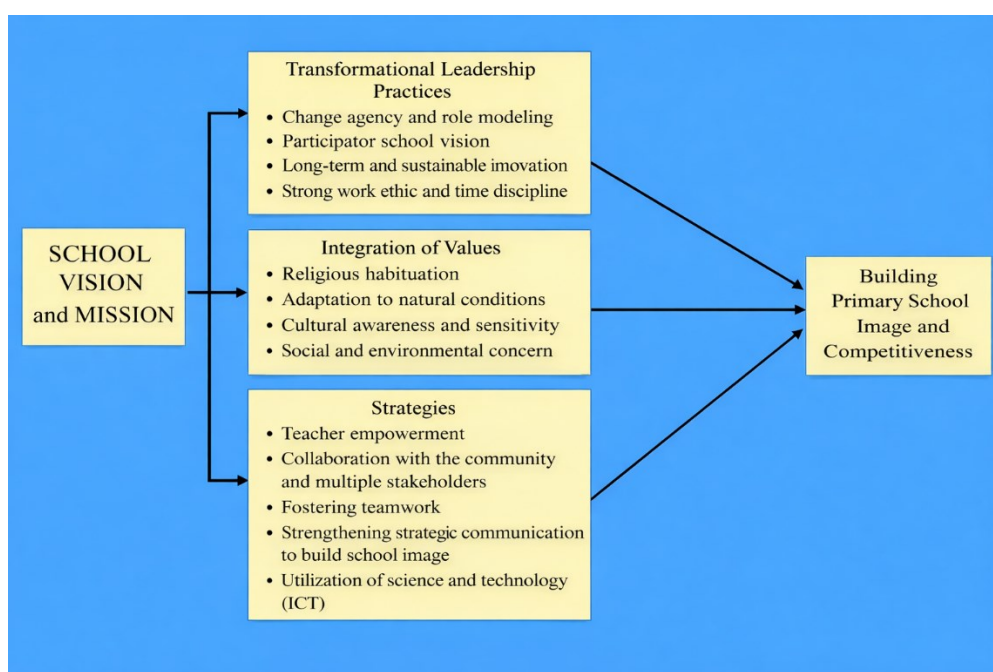


Figure 1. Transformational Leadership Model

The Figure 1 represents a conceptual pathway for developing the image and competitiveness of elementary schools, rooted in the institution's vision and mission and realized through contextual transformational leadership. Structurally, the diagram illustrates a systematic causal relationship from normative foundations to strategic outputs in the form of institutional image and competitiveness. This finding aligns with Muzdalifa et al. (2025), who emphasize that the principal's role in implementing School-Based Management (SBM) is highly strategic through the functions of educator, manager, leader, innovator, and motivator, carried out adaptively according to the school context. Thus, the vision and mission function not merely as administrative documents but as ideological instruments that drive organizational culture and effective school governance.

The vision and mission are further translated into three primary dimensions: transformational leadership practices, value integration, and operational strategies. The dimension of transformational leadership reflects the principal's role as a change agent and role model in fostering a participatory and innovative work culture. This is consistent with the findings of Nikmah et al. (2025), which demonstrate that structured supervision encompassing planning, implementation, follow-up, and evaluation significantly contributes to improving teachers' pedagogical competence. In this regard, systematic and collaborative leadership serves as the foundation for transforming instructional quality and strengthening institutional excellence.

The dimensions of value integration and operational strategies including teacher empowerment, collaboration with the community, team strengthening, and the utilization of technology serve as bridges between normative values and institutional performance. Muzdalifa et al. (2025) assert that the success of SBM depends on active teacher participation in decision-making and the reinforcement of a collaborative work culture, while Nikmah et al. (2025) highlight that effective supervision must be oriented toward continuous development and the integration of pedagogical innovation. Conceptually, this pathway underscores that school competitiveness is not merely determined by physical facilities but is the product of a consistent vision, contextual leadership, structured supervision systems, and managerial strategies that are responsive to the demands of 21st-century education.

The integration of local wisdom into school principal leadership has been shown to effectively build a quality culture aligned with the National Education Standards through the internalization of values such as deliberation, mutual cooperation, religiosity, and exemplary conduct. This finding underscores that ecological and social contexts should not be viewed merely as administrative settings, but rather as strategic value sources that shape leadership practices and strengthen institutional legitimacy. In the context of MDIM Kindaung, the wetland environment functions similarly as a foundational identity that structures organizational culture and reinforces public trust. Consequently, the school's image is constructed through the coherence between contextual values, leadership practices, and the collective experiences of school members (Rohyadi et al., 2025).

Effective leadership has a tangible impact on the professional performance of educators. Conceptually, this finding reinforces the assumption that contextual transformational leadership not only enhances external image but also strengthens internal dimensions, including motivation and performance quality. When the ecological identity of the school is communicated in an inspiring manner, it generates a collective psychological drive that improves the quality of educational services. Therefore, school competitiveness emerges from the simultaneous interaction between context-based legitimacy, the reinforcement of quality culture, and the improvement of teacher performance, all mediated by a positive institutional image (Lestari et al., 2022).

This model illustrates that the wetland context serves as an ecological and social foundation shaping the principal's transformational leadership practices. Such

leadership directly contributes to the development of school image, which subsequently functions as a strategic mechanism for enhancing primary school competitiveness. The conceptual model emphasizes that transformational leadership does not operate in a vacuum but is embedded within specific ecological and cultural contexts. At MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin, wetland characteristics are not positioned as constraints but as sources of value, identity, and leadership legitimacy. School image functions as a mediating construct that bridges the influence of leadership on competitiveness. In other words, school competitiveness does not improve solely through leadership practices, but through the consistent formation of positive public perceptions and trust. This model enriches the study of educational leadership by advancing a place based transformational leadership approach that is particularly relevant for schools located in distinctive ecological contexts, such as wetlands, coastal areas, remote regions, and disaster prone environments.

4. Conclusion

Wetland based transformational leadership positions the ecological context as a source of legitimacy and a primary driving force of leadership, significantly strengthening internal school effectiveness while simultaneously building institutional identity, public image, and the sustainability of primary schools. This contextual leadership approach affirms the strategic potential of local wisdom as a foundational element in enhancing school competitiveness amid the dynamics and demands of modern education. Transformational leadership grounded in religious, ecological, and cultural values not only improves internal school effectiveness but also functions as a strategic approach to building school reputation, identity, and long term competitiveness. The sustainability of MDIM Kindaung Banjarmasin as a school with a history of more than a century is supported by transformational leadership strategies that balance tradition and innovation. Teacher empowerment, social collaboration, teamwork, strategic communication, and the effective utilization of science and technology operate as an integrated set of mutually reinforcing strategies that strengthen institutional resilience, foster a positive school image, and enhance school competitiveness.

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Menciptakan Lingkungan Belajar yang Kondusif. 5(1), 312–321.

How to cite this article:

Pratiwi, D. A., & Aslamiah. (2026). Wetland-Based Transformational Leadership in Building the Image and Competitiveness of Primary Schools. *Journal of Educational Sciences*, 10(4), 96-111.
