

Leading Through Transformative Communication: School Principals' Strategies for Human Resource Development in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how transformative communication serves as a key strategy for school principals in leading human resource development in the digital age. Although discussions of transformational and digital leadership have become increasingly common in educational research, the specific dimension of transformative communication has received little attention. To address this gap, a systematic literature review was conducted using the PRISMA protocol, resulting in the selection of 15 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025. The review highlights that most studies focus on how principals guide digital transformation, improve teachers' digital competence, and nurture innovative school cultures. Yet, communication often appears only as a supportive function, rather than as the central mechanism of leadership. Findings from the reviewed literature indicate that communication which is visionary, inspirational, and empowering plays a decisive role in motivating teachers, reducing resistance to change, and building collective commitment. In terms of methodology, qualitative approaches dominate, offering rich contextual insights but limiting generalizability. This underlines the need for more diverse and robust empirical studies, including large-scale surveys and longitudinal designs, to examine the concrete impact of transformative communication. The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it integrates three strands of scholarship; transformational leadership, digital leadership, and human resource development through the lens of transformative communication, offering a more holistic perspective than previous fragmented discussions. Practically, it suggests that principals should view communication not as an administrative tool, but as a fundamental leadership strategy to articulate vision, foster collaboration, and empower both teachers and staff. Overall, this study affirms that transformative communication is vital for sustainable human resource development and sets out a clear direction for future research in diverse educational contexts.

KEYWORDS-Transformative Communication; School Leadership; Digital Transformation; Human Resource Development

I. INTRODUCTION

Technological transformation and digitalization have reshaped many aspects of life, with education being one of the most affected. Schools today are not only expected to adopt new technologies but also to cultivate a digital culture that fosters collaboration, innovation, resilience, and sustainability (Pamungkas, 2021; Bajac & Fiser, 2024). In general, transformation requires a transitional phase in which institutions learn to embrace innovation and welcome new, positive changes (Aulia et al., 2024). Within this context, the role of the principal extends far beyond administrative duties. Principals are now expected to serve as digital leaders and chief communicators who articulate the vision and direction of their schools (Rini et al., 2020). Effective leadership in the digital era demands not only managerial competence but also transformative communication, the capacity to motivate, inspire, and mobilize teachers and staff toward shared goals (Talaumbauna et al., 2023).

Transformative communication is understood as a form of interaction that goes beyond the simple exchange of transactional information. At its core, this concept highlights the ability of communication to spark significant changes in the way individuals or groups understand issues, behave, and even structure their social relationships (Erfizal, 2024). Transformative communication is designed to bring about deep shifts whether in individuals, communities, or society at large by raising new awareness and encouraging actions that can lead to broader social change, particularly in addressing inequities and imbalances (Iba et al., 2024). It is characterized by visionary, inspirational, and empowering exchanges that are capable of stimulating behavioral change and nurturing collective commitment (Lai et al., 2020). For school principals, transformative communication is not confined to delivering policies; it involves building narratives that inspire, motivate, and bring together educational stakeholders around the shared goal of digital transformation (Mistiah et al., 2022). In this sense, transformative communication operates as a strategic instrument for leading innovation and sustaining the long-term growth of schools.

Leading Through Transformative Communication: School Principals' Strategies for Human Resource Development in the Digital Age

The relevance of transformative communication becomes even more evident when connected to the human resources of education, namely teachers and school staff. Teachers require both motivation and professional support to embrace innovative pedagogical practices, while staff members need empowerment to effectively manage digital systems (Aliimu et al., 2025). Principals who practice transformative communication are far more likely to increase teacher engagement, foster collaborative practices, and encourage a digital mindset among their teams. In other words, transformative communication is not merely a leadership style; it is also a pathway to strengthening the overall capacity of a school's human resources (Musawir et al., 2025).

A number of previous studies have already highlighted the role of transformational leadership in promoting school innovation and improving teacher performance. One such study by Musriadi et al., (2022) shows that principals who adopt transformational leadership significantly enhance teacher performance by inspiring, motivating, and encouraging critical thinking. By responding to teachers' needs and creating a supportive environment, principals are able to drive innovation and raise the quality of teaching, which ultimately benefits student learning and development. These findings are reinforced by another study like Roesminingsih & Windasari (2025), which concludes that transformational leadership affects teacher performance through the creation of a positive work climate, stronger communication, and sustained motivation. When combined with a constructive school environment, this leadership style contributes to innovation and greater overall teacher effectiveness.

At the same time, the body of research on digital leadership has also expanded, particularly in relation to how principals manage technology-driven change. Similarly, literature on school communication has addressed themes such as transparency, participation, and interaction patterns in educational management. Yet, studies that explicitly place transformative communication at the very heart of school leadership in the digital era remain relatively scarce. More importantly, there is still limited evidence of how transformative communication directly supports the professional growth of teachers and school staff as the key human resources of education.

This situation underlines a clear research gap while also pointing to the distinctive position of the present study. Whereas previous scholarship has tended to examine leadership, communication, or digital transformation separately, this research seeks to offer a more integrative perspective. Its novelty lies in uniting three crucial dimensions; transformative communication, school leadership, and human resource development within the context of digital transformation, using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach.

Accordingly, this study aims to conduct an SLR to identify the role of transformative communication in school leadership during the digital era and to analyze its implications for the development of teachers and school staff. Through synthesizing the existing body of literature, the study aspires not only to contribute theoretically to the advancement of educational management scholarship but also to provide practical insights for principals who wish to strengthen human resource capacity through transformative communication.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, guided by the PRISMA protocol (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*), to ensure that the review process is structured, transparent, and systematic (Boland et al., 2014). Following the SLR guidelines, the study was carried out in three main stages: (1) planning and literature search, (2) selection and quality assessment of articles, and (3) synthesis and presentation of findings (Carrera-Rivera et al., 2022).

The first stage involved planning and conducting the literature search. This began with defining the focus and formulating the central research question: *how do school principals apply transformative communication in the digital era, and what are its implications for the development of teachers and school staff?* To gather credible and relevant sources, several well-regarded academic databases were selected, including Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), ERIC, and Google Scholar, each chosen for their strong reputation and broad coverage in the fields of education and management. The search process applied combinations of keywords with Boolean operators (AND, OR). The primary keywords included: "transformative communication" OR "transformational communication," "school leadership" OR "principal leadership," "digital era" OR "digital transformation," and "teacher development" OR "human resource development." Identified articles were first screened through their titles, abstracts, and keywords, followed by a more detailed filtering based on topical relevance.

Table 1. The search string used for the systematic review process

Database	Search String
Scopus	("transformative communication" OR "transformational communication") AND ("school leadership") AND ("digital era" OR "digital transformation") AND ("teacher development" OR "human resource development")
Web of Science	("school leadership" AND "digital transformation" AND "teacher professional development")
ERIC	("school leadership" AND "digital transformation" AND "teacher professional development")
Google Scholar	"transformative communication" + "school leadership" + "digital era" + "teacher development"

(Source: Author's Work)

Leading Through Transformative Communication: School Principals' Strategies for Human Resource Development in the Digital Age

The second stage was the selection and quality assessment of the literature. The identified articles were screened using strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria specified that only peer-reviewed journal articles, published between 2020 and 2025, written in English, and directly addressing themes related to transformative communication, school leadership, educational human resource development, or digital transformation would be considered. Conversely, articles in the form of conference proceedings, books, policy reports, grey literature, or other non-journal publications were excluded from the review.

All articles that passed this initial screening were then examined more thoroughly for both quality and relevance by reviewing their titles, abstracts, and full texts. To ensure accuracy, the validation of relevance was conducted through internal discussions among the research team and by cross-checking with key literature in the fields of leadership and educational communication.

Table 2. The inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Year of Publication	2020 - 2025	<2020
Document Types	Article journal (research article)	Book chapter, review, note, editorial, book, letter, retracted, short survey, thesis
Language	English	Non English
Subject Area	Social sciences, education	Besides social sciences, education
Topic	Transformative communication, school leadership, digital transformation, human	Except school context

(Source: Author's Work)

The third stage was the synthesis and presentation of findings. The articles that met the final eligibility criteria were analyzed using a narrative synthesis approach, which involved grouping the research findings into key themes, comparing similarities and differences across studies, and identifying trends, patterns, and research gaps. This process provided a more comprehensive understanding of how school principals' transformative communication in the digital era contributes to fostering innovation and strengthening the capacity of teachers and school staff.

At the end of the review process, 15 articles were identified as the most relevant and of sufficient quality to form the basis of the analysis. These articles were then coded according to the predetermined criteria, with a particular focus on themes of school leadership, transformative communication, human resource development, and digital transformation.

III. RESULT

This section presents the results of the systematic literature review based on 15 selected research articles. The analysis aims to address how school principals employ transformative communication in leading digital transformation and supporting human resource development. The reviewed studies were mapped according to their focus, methodology, and key findings, which are synthesized in the following table.

Table 3. Summary of the relevant articles

No	Author/Year	Title	Method	Findings	Identified Gap
1	Schmitz, L. M., et al. (2023)	Transformational leadership for technology integration in schools: Empowering teachers to use technology in a more demanding way	Qualitative	Transformational leadership improves teachers' readiness in integrating technology	Transformative communication not explicitly addressed
2	Anderson, R. J. (2023)	Leading the digitalisation process in K-12 schools – The school leaders' perspective	Qualitative	Principals are key to successful digitalisation	Transformational communication not explored
3	Karakose, T. (2021)	Examining Teachers' Perspectives on School Principals' Digital Leadership Roles and Technology Capabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic	Qualitative	Teachers perceive digital leadership as essential for digital competence	Communication strategies not the main focus
4	Karakose, T. (2024)	A Review of the Conceptual Structure and Evolution of Digital Leadership Research in Education	SLR	Identifies trends and future directions in DL	No focus on transformative communication
5	Zulhrul, A., et al (2024)	Digital Skills Development and Workforce Innovation: A Systematic Review of Human Capital Management in Education	Qualitative Case Study	Human capital management supports teacher HRD	Communication dimension underexplored

Leading Through Transformative Communication: School Principals' Strategies for Human Resource Development in the Digital Age

6	Raptis, N., et al (2025)	Distributed Leadership, New Technologies and Teachers' Digital Competence in the Post-COVID Era	Mixed-Method	Distributed leadership enhances teacher digital competence	Communication as a transformative strategy missing
7	Rasdiana, et al (2024)	The effect of digital leadership in nurturing teachers' innovation skills for sustainable technology integration mediated by professional learning communities	Qualitative	Digital leadership drives innovation through professional learning communities	Innovation emphasized, not transformative communication
8	Suratman, et al (2024)	The Influence of Digital Leadership Toward Digital Transformation of Education	Quantitative	DL significantly contributes to digitalisation	Leadership communication not analyzed
9	Raptis, N., et al (2024)	Examining the Role of School Leadership in the Digital Advancement of Educational Organizations	Qualitative Literature Review	Principals support both technology & HRD	Strategic communication not emphasized
10	Nurtalawati, et al (2025)	The Influence of Principal Leadership and Communication on Educator Performance in Elementary Schools in the Catur Cluster	Quantitative	Leadership communication affects teacher performance	No explicit use of "transformative communication" framework

12	Varianti, Herlin., et al (2024)	Pengaruh kepemimpinan transformasional terhadap pengembangan sumber daya manusia di sebuah satuan pendidikan	Qualitative	TL positively influences HRD in schools	Role of communication not analyzed
13	Malik, Abdul., et al (2024)	The Role of Leadership and Communication Competence in Increasing Learning Motivation in the Kampus Mengajar Program	Quantitative	Communication competence boosts teacher/student motivation	Not framed as transformative communication
14	Komari, et al (2024)	Leadership Communication Style and Teacher Work Culture towards Collaborative Management	Mixed-Method	Leadership communication influences collaborative work culture	Transformative communication for HRD not examined
15	Abdullah, Shodiq (2023)	Digital Transformation in Education: Examining the Contribution of Madrasah Principal Leadership to Teacher Teaching Performance	Qualitative Case Study	DL supports teacher performance in digital era	Transformative communication absent

(Source: Author's Work)

Publication Trends

From the final selection, a total of 15 articles were included in the synthesis. These articles were published between 2020 and 2025, with a noticeable increase in 2022 and 2023. This pattern suggests that the issue of school leadership in digital transformation began to attract serious scholarly attention particularly in the post-pandemic period, when schools worldwide were compelled to accelerate the adoption of digital technologies.

The concentration of publications during these two years also reflects a broader global momentum surrounding educational digitalization. Many researchers recognized the urgent need to examine how school leadership responds to the rapid and disruptive changes brought about by the pandemic, especially in relation to human resource management and technological adaptation. This trend indicates that research in this area remains relatively recent, yet it is developing at a rapid pace.

Nevertheless, while the overall number of publications shows an upward trajectory, the distribution of articles across the years is uneven. The early years (2020–2021) recorded only a limited number of studies, likely because much of the research focus at that time was still directed toward crisis management in education. In the years that followed, interest in digital leadership expanded into broader themes, including innovation, teacher capacity development, and the communication strategies employed by principals.

Thematic Focus

Most of the reviewed articles highlight principals' strategies in leading digital transformation, with a strong emphasis on human resource development. Dominant themes include teacher capacity building, strengthening digital skills, and fostering school

Leading Through Transformative Communication: School Principals' Strategies for Human Resource Development in the Digital Age

cultures that are adaptive to innovation. Several studies also underline the importance of visionary leadership in setting a strategic direction that enables schools to remain resilient in the digital era.

Alongside teacher development, some studies also examine the barriers encountered in implementing digital transformation. These barriers range from limited digital competence among educators, resistance to change, and inadequate technological infrastructure. Such findings suggest that school leadership not only plays a role in driving innovation but must also be equipped to address practical challenges on the ground.

Although transformational leadership frequently appears as an analytical framework in these studies, only a small number explicitly address the dimension of transformative communication. In other words, communication as a central strategy for digital transformation leadership remains largely underexplored. This underscores a research gap that presents an opportunity for original contributions in this area.

Methodological Approaches

From a methodological standpoint, the majority of the articles employ qualitative approaches. Case studies and interviews are the most frequently used methods, providing researchers with in-depth insights into principals' practices and strategies in managing digital transformation. In addition, several studies adopt mixed-methods designs, combining survey data with interviews or classroom observations to offer a more comprehensive picture. Such designs enrich the findings by linking broad quantitative data with contextual qualitative evidence.

By contrast, purely quantitative studies are relatively scarce. Only a handful of articles utilize large-scale surveys to measure relationships between leadership styles and other variables, such as teacher performance or levels of technology adoption. This scarcity highlights the need to expand the empirical evidence base with more statistical data in the field of school leadership and digital transformation.

Research Contexts

Geographically, much of the research analyzed originates from Asia and Europe. Studies in Asia often highlight digital infrastructure challenges and variations in readiness across schools, while research in Europe tends to emphasize educational policy and innovative practices in digital leadership. A smaller number of studies come from Africa, where the focus is frequently on issues of unequal access to technology.

Variation is also visible in the levels of education examined. Most studies focus on secondary schools, both junior and senior high schools, which are often viewed as being at a critical stage in integrating digital learning. In contrast, fewer studies investigate primary schools, and there is almost no research explicitly addressing early childhood education or vocational schools.

These diverse contexts illustrate that school leadership in the digital era is a global issue but one that is still strongly shaped by local conditions. Policy frameworks, organizational culture, and resource availability all emerge as key variables shaping how principals lead change. This suggests a need for more comprehensive studies that compare practices across different educational contexts and regions.

Research Gaps

Overall, the synthesis reveals that digital leadership and transformational leadership have been widely explored. However, the dimension of transformative communication as a core strategy for principals in developing human resources remains largely overlooked. Yet communication plays a vital role in building shared vision, motivating teachers, and overcoming resistance to change. The limited attention to transformative communication in prior studies highlights both theoretical and practical gaps. Theoretically, there is a need to better understand how communication can serve as an instrument for organizational transformation in education. Practically, principals require concrete guidance on effective communication strategies to navigate the challenges of digital transformation.

This study, therefore, seeks to make an original contribution by focusing specifically on principals' transformative communication strategies. By doing so, it aims not only to enrich the existing body of literature but also to provide practical implications for strengthening school leadership in the face of digital era challenges.

IV. DISCUSSION

A systematic review of 15 research articles shows that school leadership in the digital era is often discussed through the lenses of transformational leadership and digital leadership. However, the dimension of transformative communication is rarely addressed explicitly. Most studies emphasize principals' ability to lead technological adoption, develop teachers' digital skills, and foster an innovative school climate (Schmitz et al., 2023; Andersson, 2024; Karakose et al., 2021). Yet, communication is more often framed as a technical function, such as conveying policies or ensuring coordination rather than as a transformative tool that can reshape educators' thinking, attitudes, and behaviors (Malik et al., 2024; Ratnawati, 2023). This points to a conceptual gap, since as Bass and Riggio (2006) highlight, transformational leadership is grounded in inspirational communication, a clear

Leading Through Transformative Communication: School Principals' Strategies for Human Resource Development in the Digital Age

articulation of vision, and personal attention to organizational members (Klein, 2023). Without deep, meaningful communication practices, the transformative essence of leadership risks being only partially realized.

In terms of human resource development, the reviewed literature consistently underscores the significant influence of leadership on teachers' professional growth, work motivation, and readiness for change. Garavan, Morley, and Gunnigle (2001) stress that HRD should not be understood merely as a transfer of technical skills, but as a holistic process encompassing empowerment, the cultivation of a learning culture, and the building of collective capacity (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). At this point, transformative communication becomes crucial. It enables principals not only to give instructions but also to inspire teachers, reduce resistance to innovation, and cultivate a shared sense of ownership over the school's direction. This aligns with Fullan's (2007) view that educational change is inherently a social process, which means effective leadership must construct motivating narratives and engage all stakeholders (Shelley, 2019). Principals, therefore, act as "narrative leaders" who frame change as an opportunity rather than merely a demand.

Even so, the challenges identified in these studies reflect the complexity schools face in the digital era. Several highlight teachers' limited digital competence, which creates a gap between innovation policies and classroom practices. Infrastructure issues, such as poor internet access and limited devices also slow transformation efforts. Moreover, cultural resistance to digital innovation frequently emerges, particularly in schools with strong traditions of conventional methods. In the change management literature, Kotter (1996) stresses that communication is a primary factor in overcoming resistance (Appelbaum et al., 2012). Clear, consistent, and visionary communication can foster a sense of urgency, align goals, and encourage active participation. Thus, when principals frame digital transformation not as an administrative burden but as a pathway to empowerment and professional growth, teachers' perceptions are more likely to shift positively. This strengthens the argument that transformative communication is not merely supportive but a strategic mechanism to address systemic barriers.

From a methodological standpoint, most of the reviewed studies employ qualitative approaches, with case studies and in-depth interviews as the dominant methods. These approaches offer rich insights into principals' lived experiences, leadership strategies, and school-level organizational dynamics (Zulbilal & Torrido, 2024; Rasdiana et al., 2024; Raptis et al., 2024). However, the dominance of qualitative work limits generalizability. Quantitative studies that systematically examine the link between principals' communication styles and indicators such as teacher performance or successful technology adoption remain scarce. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) suggest, mixed-method or longitudinal designs could provide a more comprehensive understanding of such complex educational phenomena. In other words, the existing literature leans more toward contextual description rather than generalizable empirical evidence, leaving open substantial opportunities for future research through large-scale quantitative analysis or experimental designs testing the effectiveness of transformative communication directly.

Theoretically, this synthesis contributes by bridging previously fragmented discussions. Earlier research tends to focus separately on transformational leadership, digital leadership, or HRD. This study seeks to integrate the three domains through the perspective of transformative communication. By placing communication at the core of leadership, it emphasizes that school leadership in the digital era cannot be reduced to technical adoption of technology or the ability to inspire teachers alone. Instead, it should be seen as a communicative process that shapes meaning, raises awareness, and mobilizes collective action. This perspective resonates with Kouzes and Posner (2017), who argue that leadership is essentially a relational and communicative process that drives people toward shared aspirations (Tineh et al., 2008).

The practical contributions are equally significant. Principals can leverage transformative communication to build a clear digital vision narrative, foster collaboration among teachers, and empower staff to manage digital systems. Rather than focusing solely on administrative control, principals who are communicative and inspiring can create a supportive work environment that promotes continuous learning. In practice, this can be realized through regular communication forums, participatory dialogue, and expressions of appreciation that strengthen intrinsic motivation. These findings suggest that digital transformation in schools is not solely a matter of technology but also a matter of communication that activates human potential.

Beyond that, this literature synthesis highlights research limitations while pointing to promising directions for future inquiry. First, very few studies explicitly examine transformative communication in the context of school leadership. Existing work often treats communication generally or as a minor aspect of leadership style. Second, the educational contexts studied are mostly limited to secondary schools in Asia and Europe, with little attention given to primary schools, vocational education, or developing countries. Third, methodological variation remains narrow, making it necessary to pursue quantitative, comparative, or longitudinal studies to more convincingly test the effectiveness of transformative communication.

In conclusion, this study affirms that transformative communication is not a peripheral element of leadership but a fundamental strategy for sustainable HRD in the digital age. The role of the principal as a transformative communicator can be decisive in determining the success of digital transformation in schools. Academically, this study enriches the literature by offering a new integration, while practically, it provides concrete guidance for principals to build leadership that is communicative, inspiring, and empowering. Ultimately, the challenges and gaps identified in the literature point to promising

Leading Through Transformative Communication: School Principals' Strategies for Human Resource Development in the Digital Age

pathways for future research, particularly in exploring how transformative communication can reshape the landscape of educational leadership in the digital era.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that transformative communication is a vital element of school principals' leadership in the digital era, even though existing literature rarely places it as a central focus. A systematic review of 15 articles shows that both transformational and digital leadership play significant roles in driving school innovation and human resource development. However, communication is often regarded merely as a supporting function. In reality, visionary, inspiring, and empowering communication practices have been shown to enhance teacher motivation, reduce resistance to change, and strengthen collective commitment in the process of digital transformation. Theoretically, this study contributes by integrating three previously fragmented areas of literature; transformational leadership, digital leadership, and human resource development through the lens of transformative communication. Practically, the implication is that principals should treat communication not simply as a tool for conveying policies, but as a core strategy to build vision narratives, foster collaboration, and empower both teachers and staff. Therefore, transformative communication can be seen as a fundamental strategy in leading HRD within schools in the digital era. At the same time, this study emphasizes the need for further research to empirically examine transformative communication practices in broader educational contexts, across different school levels and regional backgrounds. Such work will help strengthen the theoretical foundation while providing more comprehensive practical guidance for future educational leadership.

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