

Adaptive Leadership of School Principals in Strengthening Organizational Culture towards Excellent Accreditation

Hefniy^{1✉}, Muhammad Alfi Alfaridli¹, Hasan Baharun¹, Zohaib Hassan Sain²

¹ Universitas Nurul Jadid, Probolinggo, Jawa Timur, Indonesia

² Superior University, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

✉ Corresponding author:
Hefniy
hefniy@unuja.ac.id

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This study explores how school principals employ adaptive leadership to enhance organizational culture and achieve excellent accreditation, motivated by the imperative for a leadership paradigm responsive to evolving educational policies, accreditation standards, and quality dynamics. Using a qualitative case study approach, data from interviews, observations, and document analysis reveal four interrelated factors: adaptive reflection in change management, participatory collaboration, transformation of quality values and culture, and program innovation addressing accreditation demands. Together, these dimensions constitute an organizational learning cycle that supports a resilient quality culture and bolsters institutional responsiveness to external pressures. The findings underscore adaptive leadership's critical role in fostering reflective, collaborative, and innovative educational environments. Conceptually, the study enriches leadership literature by affirming the nexus among adaptability, collaboration, and cultural transformation. Practically, it offers school principals a framework to formulate quality improvement strategies grounded in organizational learning, with potential applicability across diverse educational contexts to elevate quality culture and accreditation performance.



Keywords: *Adaptive Leadership; Cultural Transformation; Excellent Accreditation; Organizational Culture; Organizational Learning Cycle.*

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary shift in the educational-management paradigm requires principals to possess adaptive skills that enable them to respond to changes in policies, digitalization, and the demand for educational quality (Himmetoglu et al., 2020; Mogas et al., 2022; Mukhtar & Fook, 2020). This capacity involves not only technical leadership skills but also the emotional and social skills required to manage organizational change (Chen & Guo, 2020; Khoa et al., 2023; Orlova et al., 2023). The introduction of performance-driven accreditation and the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) policy requires the adoption of collaborative and reflective leadership practices by principals to strengthen organizational culture in schools (Albaroudi et al., 2025; Indrasari et al., 2024; Quilabert et al., 2024). Therefore, adaptive leadership is highly relevant to creating a responsive and quality-oriented work environment. This topic is academically significant because it links two aspects of educational management: leader flexibility and the cultivation of a sustainable quality culture.

Preliminary findings indicate that the principal at SMP Unggulan Maslahatul Ummah has adopted an adaptive, participatory leadership approach grounded in cooperation. The school leadership emphasizes not only administrative success but also a culture of collaboration among teachers, staff, and the school committee in decision-making (Dai et al., 2025; Kinchington, 2023; Morris et al., 2020). However, developing a culture of quality remains challenging, particularly amid the administrative pressures of the accreditation process. This situation reveals a tension between a results-oriented focus and a learning-oriented approach within the organization. The principal's adaptive leadership is therefore regarded as a crucial strategy for balancing innovation with organizational stability. Accordingly, this study examines how the principal uses an adaptive leadership style to strengthen organizational culture and achieve excellent accreditation.

Research by (Chughtai et al., 2024) shows that adaptive leadership mediates the relationship between learning organizations and organizational innovation through change self-efficacy, indicating that leaders' adaptability plays an essential role in enhancing organizational members' innovativeness. Similarly, McKimm explains how educational leaders use adaptive leadership to foster collaboration, improve stakeholder relationships, and cultivate ownership of change in uncertain contexts (McKimm et al., 2023). Azorín and Fullan argue that deeper collaborative cultures are necessary to institutionalize organizational change and that leadership is a key factor in developing such cultures (Azorín & Fullan, 2022). Collectively, these studies confirm that adaptive leadership can enable organizational innovation and collaboration. However, few specifically address secondary schools in Indonesia or link adaptive leadership to the school accreditation process. This study addresses that gap by providing empirical evidence on the adaptive leadership of the principal at SMP Unggulan Maslahatul Ummah, Probolinggo, East Java, Indonesia, and directly

connecting the adaptive leadership style to the transformation of the school's organizational culture and the attainment of excellent accreditation.

The research gap addressed the absence of empirical studies linking adaptive leadership to the development of a quality culture within school accreditation in Indonesia. Most previous studies have conceptualized or applied adaptive leadership in business and higher-education settings rather than in the socially, spiritually, and bureaucratically complex environment of secondary schools. This study examines how principals implement adaptive leadership to create a collaborative, open, and sustainable work culture conducive to excellent accreditation. The study thereby contributes to the literature on educational leadership in Indonesia, which remains empirically underrepresented at the secondary-school level.

This study innovatively integrates adaptive leadership with a quality-culture development strategy for school accreditation. Unlike prior research emphasizing structural change, it reframes adaptive leadership within values-driven organizational culture transformation. Principals are conceptualized not merely as decision-makers but as facilitators of organizational learning through a participatory approach. A novel theoretical framework is proposed that links leadership adaptation, internal collaboration, and quality culture as prerequisites for excellent accreditation outcomes. The research advances both theoretical understanding and practical models for principled school leadership.

The investigation explores how principals employ adaptive leadership to reinforce organizational culture and achieve high accreditation standards. It elucidates the dynamic interplay among adaptive leadership values, collaborative patterns among school members, and the formation of a sustainable quality culture. These insights contribute to the development of adaptive leadership-based management practices suited to the demands of twenty-first-century education. The study's significance lies in empowering principals as change agents who foster not only successful accreditation but also enduring organizational identity.

METHOD

The study employed a qualitative case study conducted at SMP Unggulan Maslahatul Ummah, Curahsawo, Indonesia. The school was selected purposively because, as a developing institution, it had already demonstrated notable progress toward excellent accreditation. Within this context, the study sought an in-depth understanding of the principal's adaptive leadership in strengthening organizational culture in an authentic, dynamic educational setting ([Sridharan, 2021](#)). This design was chosen because it captures participants' perspectives and lived experiences, along with their actual practices, in a natural setting. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal (Ks), vice principal (Wks), teachers (Gr), and

administrative staff (Stu), along with participant observation, yielding a detailed, contextual account.

This study employed several trustworthiness strategies to strengthen the credibility of the findings, including data triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data obtained from different sources and methods; member checking was used to verify the accuracy of interpretations with the participants. Moreover, prolonged engagement in the research setting enabled the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the context and to minimize bias. Together, these strategies enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the qualitative findings.

The data were analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, foundational procedures in qualitative research (Khoa et al., 2023). These methods facilitated the organization of complex data, the identification of patterns, and the derivation of meaningful interpretations through an iterative process, thereby constructing a coherent understanding of adaptive leadership's impact on organizational culture. Despite focusing on a single case, the study's findings enable analytical generalization applicable to educational policy. The insights offer transferable principles for adaptive leadership practice, informing leadership development, school culture enhancement, and accreditation improvement. Consequently, the qualitative approach provides valid, context-sensitive evidence to underpin evidence-based national education policy reforms, especially in comparable institutional settings (Lim, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The principal's adaptive leadership is pivotal in reinforcing the school's organizational culture, thereby facilitating excellent accreditation. Beyond curricular effectiveness, school success hinges on the principal's capacity to navigate change and align stakeholders toward a shared vision. Based on observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis at SMP Unggulan Maslahatul Ummah, adaptive leadership manifests in four core dimensions: (1) reflective adaptation in change management; (2) participatory collaboration as a strategic approach; (3) transformation of quality values and organizational culture; and (4) programmatic innovation aligned with accreditation demands. These findings underscore the integral role of adaptive leadership in fostering institutional advancement through cultural and strategic renewal.

Principal's Adaptive Reflection

The principal of SMP Unggulan Maslahatul Ummah employs adaptive reflection as a core strategy to manage change and reinforce organizational culture toward excellent accreditation. Adaptive reflection is conceptualized not merely as individual

policy reconsideration but as a collective cognitive and social process involving the school community. The principal's role is that of a facilitator, promoting awareness of the substantive changes underlying policies rather than serving as the sole decision-maker. This reflective process shifts the school's focus from administrative compliance to a profound understanding of educational quality, encouraging faculty and staff to grasp the rationale behind policy measures rather than merely implementing them procedurally. The approach supports adaptation to policy shifts, administrative digitization, and accreditation requirements, thereby enhancing the school's capacity for meaningful change.

Table 1. Principals' Adaptive Reflection in Managing Change

Adaptive Reflection Indicators	Informant Statement	Informant
Reflection as a first step in understanding change	<i>"Whenever there is a change, such as a new policy or standard, I begin with reflection. I engage teachers and staff in understanding the underlying significance of the change to prevent mere rote compliance."</i>	Principal
Reflection as a collective process	<i>"Reacting only after changes occur leaves the school directionless. I prioritize facilitating the team's critical reflection on why the change matters to the school's quality."</i>	Vice Principal
Reflection builds teacher awareness and participation	<i>"I am included in the decision-making process rather than merely receiving directives. Typically, the principal initiates discussions and encourages us to express our perspectives before decisions are made."</i>	Teacher
Reflection as a tool for developing strategic direction	<i>"Previously, meetings primarily served for reporting purposes; now, they emphasize comprehending new policies and aligning with the school's mission. This shift has enhanced our shared clarity about the school's overarching goals."</i>	Teacher
Reflection as an organizational learning mechanism	<i>"Collective reflection fosters mutual learning and engenders innovative ideas that enhance both our collaboration and school management."</i>	Administrative Staff

Source: research interview results

Table 1 shows that adaptive reflection is central to the principal's managerial approach in addressing policy modifications and accreditation demands. It fosters authentic awareness of change, transcending mere administrative compliance. This process permeates the school community, including teachers, staff, and the vice principal, through participatory reflection, cultivating collective recognition that policies play strategic roles in quality enhancement rather than serving as bureaucratic formalities. Consequently, this drives critical consciousness and guides the school through transformation.

Moreover, adaptive reflection is a dynamic organizational learning process in which staff members actively contribute to strategic development through reflective forums and discussions. The principal facilitates the conversion of routine meetings

into constructive learning opportunities focused on system refinement and collaborative problem-solving, rather than fault-finding. Thus, adaptive reflection has matured from a managerial task to an embedded culture of critical inquiry that underpins continuous organizational learning within the school.

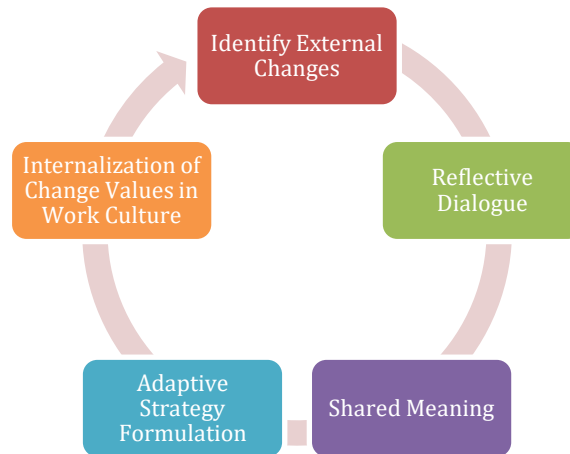


Figure 1. The Principal's Adaptive Reflection Mechanism in Managing Change

Figure 1 delineates the principal's adaptive leadership cycle in response to organizational change, beginning with the recognition of external shifts, such as new policies and accreditation requirements. This is followed by a reflective dialogue involving teachers and staff, facilitating open discussion to elucidate the change and mitigate resistance. Subsequently, collective meaning-making enables the school community to assess the change's relevance, prompting adaptive strategies including program innovation, workflow redesign, and human resource development. The cycle culminates in embedding these values within the organizational culture, fostering resilience beyond mere administrative compliance.

While adaptive reflection proved effective at SMP Unggulan Maslahatul Ummah, its transferability faces challenges. Prevailing cultures of administrative conformity, hierarchical leadership styles that restrict reflective participation, and sociocultural diversity influence its applicability. Additionally, institutional constraints such as time pressures and workload impede sustained reflection. Therefore, implementation in other contexts requires a gradual reform process, enhanced leadership capacity, and contextual adaptation to local conditions.

Participatory School Collaboration

The principal of Maslahatul Ummah Junior High School employs participatory collaboration as a principal adaptive strategy to address organizational change and accreditation demands. This collaboration transcends task division, fostering collective ownership of the school's vision and quality. By forming cross-functional teams aligned with accreditation standards, the principal dismantles hierarchical barriers, enabling teachers, staff, and education personnel to contribute ideas and solutions within their domains. As the principal noted,

"I believe that change cannot be implemented alone. All elements must feel part of the process. Therefore, I formed small teams for each accreditation standard so that everyone is involved and feels a sense of shared responsibility" (Interview, KS, 12/10/25).

This reflects a shift from unilateral decision-making toward inclusive engagement that builds trust and motivation. A student affairs teacher affirmed,

"We are not only given administrative tasks, but also space to propose new ideas. Every week we hold a joint reflection on the progress of accreditation standards, and the results often form the basis for the principal's decisions" (Interview, GR, 12/10/25), illustrating a two-way collaborative process and shared leadership. Weekly meetings facilitate horizontal communication, empowering teachers as strategic actors rather than passive implementers.

Administrative staff similarly experienced a role transformation:

"Initially, I felt our role in administration was not that important in the accreditation process. However, the principal asked us to participate in quality team meetings because administrative data is crucial for accreditation scores. Now we are more involved" (Interview, STU, 12/10/25).

This shift signifies the integration of administrative functions into strategic quality improvement, advancing the paradigm from sectoral to cross-sectoral collaboration. Collectively, participatory collaboration as an adaptive mechanism that cultivates reflective dialogue, shared commitment, and organizational innovation. The principal's inclusive leadership fosters a unified, adaptive culture, strengthening the sustainability of school quality through synergistic engagement among all community members.

Transformation of School Quality Values and Culture

The principal played a central role in transforming the school's quality values and culture, facilitating its attainment of excellent accreditation. This adaptive transformation shifted the school's orientation from mere administrative compliance to the internalization of quality as a collective working culture. Initially, some teachers complied only under directive pressure; however, through the principal's persuasion, role modeling, and reflective practice, quality values became embedded in daily routines. The process gradually reshaped teacher attitudes, reframing quality from a prerequisite for accreditation into a professional and moral obligation to students. Weekly reflective forums and data-driven evaluations fostered the values of integrity, discipline, and teamwork, cultivating a culture in which quality emerges from shared awareness rather than from imposed mandates.

Table 2. Transformation of School Quality Values and Culture

Indicators of Value Transformation and Quality Culture	Informant's Statement	Informant
Initial compliance due to accreditation demands	<i>"Initially, we simply followed the principal's instructions because we were afraid of a drop in</i>	Teacher

	<i>accreditation. We didn't fully understand the meaning of quality itself."</i>	
Shifting the meaning of quality into professional awareness	<i>"Now we realize that quality isn't about grades on paper, but about improving our service to students."</i>	Teacher
Exemplary behavior of the principal as an agent of value change	<i>"The principal always set an example by arriving early, helping prepare documents, and even personally inspecting classes. From then on, we felt ashamed if we weren't performing optimally."</i>	Teacher
Reflective habits and an evaluative culture	<i>"Every weekend, we reflect on our work together. Not to blame, but to improve. That got us used to thinking about quality."</i>	Vice Principal for Curriculum
Integration of quality values into the work culture	<i>"Now, quality has become a habit, not an order. We remind each other if something doesn't meet standards."</i>	Administration Staff

Source: research interview results

Table 2 illustrates a progressive transformation of quality values and culture within the school. Initially, teacher awareness of quality was driven primarily by accreditation requirements; one teacher acknowledged adhering to the principal's directives to maintain scores. Over time, this perception shifted toward professional accountability, as another teacher articulated quality as an effort to enhance student services rather than a mere administrative metric.

This cultural shift is closely linked to the principal's exemplary leadership, characterized by early arrival, hands-on involvement in documentation, and active monitoring of instruction, which cultivates a constructive work ethic and motivating sense of collective responsibility. Regular weekend reflection and evaluation sessions, described by the Vice Principal of Curriculum as mechanisms for performance enhancement rather than fault-finding, have further embedded quality norms into daily practice. Quality values are now integral to the school's work culture, fostering a shared accountability whereby individuals encourage one another to uphold standards.

Program Innovation and Adaptive Response

The principal of SMP Unggulan Maslahatul Ummah employs innovative programs and adaptive strategies to sustain quality and respond to dynamic accreditation requirements. These challenges compel the principal to integrate sustainable innovations into management, learning, and service delivery rather than merely meeting administrative criteria. Reflecting this, a vice principal noted,

"Every time there is a change in the accreditation instrument, we do not immediately panic. The principal holds a reflective meeting, analyzing each indicator one by one so we understand its essence and identify the right direction for improvement" (Interview, WKS, 12/10/25), highlighting the foundational role of reflection and participation in adaptive responses.

The principal's leadership is evident in flagship programs, *Tahfidz*, Rapid Reading of the *Kitab Turats (Al-Miftah Method)*, and Arabic and English language initiatives that address spiritual, academic, and global competencies. The *Tahfidz* Program fosters religious character and discipline aligned with accreditation's spiritual standards. The Rapid Reading program reinforces Islamic boarding school identity while promoting religious literacy. The language programs demonstrate preparedness for globalization and cross-cultural communication.

Further, the principal advances digital quality management through a Digital Quality Dashboard, enabling real-time monitoring of quality metrics. An administrative staff member explained,

"Before the digital system, accreditation documents were often scattered and recorded manually. Now everything is systematized, and the principal can directly monitor the progress of each area without having to wait for manual reports" (Interview, STU, 12/10/25).

This innovation enhances documentation efficiency and accountability without administrative overload. Collectively, these innovations serve as an organizational learning mechanism that consolidates the school's identity, enhances competitiveness, and sustains a culture of quality grounded in Islamic values, literacy, and technological integration. This adaptive approach reflects the school's capacity to align with national quality standards while preserving its institutional identity.

Discussion

The principal's adaptive leadership was fundamental to the school's effective response to evolving education policies, accreditation procedures, and quality improvement demands. This process was deliberate, characterized by deep reflection, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the transformation of institutional values, forming a cycle of organizational learning that fosters sustained innovation under constant external pressures. Adaptive reflection served as the starting point for all policy changes, reflecting the concept of double-loop learning (Blaak, 2023), where underlying assumptions are critically examined rather than merely correcting errors. Rather than imposing curricular or accreditation adjustments, the principal facilitated collective reflection on policy significance and relevance, cultivating critical awareness and deterring superficial compliance. Accordingly, the principal functioned not only as a change agent but also as a facilitator of organizational learning, aligning with Heifetz's view that adaptive leaders mobilize people to learn rather than command them (BUSA et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2023; Sarid, 2024).

The second finding underscores participatory collaboration as vital for school resilience amid change, exemplified by the principal's establishment of shared leadership involving teachers, staff, and students. This approach aligns with distributed leadership theory, highlighting collective interactions over individual

authority (Ben Sedrine et al., 2021; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Liu & Watson, 2023). Collaboration creates a synergistic work environment, enabling teacher autonomy and principal visionary leadership, with cross-disciplinary teams enhancing accreditation and curriculum development. This shared responsibility fosters both structural solidarity and moral commitment to school quality, serving as a psychological buffer that strengthens institutional resilience under external pressures.

The third finding reveals a cultural transformation driven by sustained reflection and collaboration. Principals extend focus beyond accreditation metrics to embed core values (integrity, responsibility, lifelong learning) within daily practices. This evolution aligns with organizational culture theory, positing that sustainable change arises from addressing fundamental shared assumptions (Omama Koranteng et al., 2022; Piwowar-Sulej, 2020; Wijethilake et al., 2023). Quality becomes a collective moral and professional commitment, reinforced through reflective practices such as quality meetings, innovation forums, and dialogic supervision that integrate evaluation with coaching. These processes cultivate a quality culture rooted in collective awareness and transformational leadership rather than policy compliance alone.

The fourth finding highlights program innovation as an adaptive strategy transforming accreditation challenges into sustained quality improvement. The school's flagship initiatives, the Tahfidz program, Quick Reading of the Yellow Book, and enhanced Arabic and English language offerings, harmoniously integrate religious values, literacy, and global competencies. Complementing these, the Digital Quality Dashboard increases management efficiency, transparency, and accountability. This approach exemplifies Total Quality Management and learning organization principles, emphasizing collaborative reflection and continuous development (Bagherian et al., 2023; MacLean, 2021; Mincu, 2022). Consequently, accreditation success is reframed as dependent not merely on meeting standards but also on ongoing innovation and organizational transformation that are responsive to educational demands.

Overall, this study confirms that the four findings adaptive reflection, participatory collaboration, value transformation, and program innovation form a unified adaptive leadership system that serves as an engine of change at the school level. The principal's role is not merely as a policy controller. However, as an architect of a learning culture that fosters resilience, creativity, and collective responsibility, Adaptive leadership is no longer understood as the technical ability to manage change, but rather as the existential ability to give new meaning to every challenge. Through in-depth reflection, inclusive collaboration, transformation of values, and continuous innovation, the principal successfully guides the school toward excellent accreditation while maintaining the sustainability of a humanistic and civilized quality culture.

This study reveals that adaptive reflection, participatory collaboration, value transformation, and program innovation collectively constitute an integrated adaptive leadership system that drives school-level change. The principal's role goes beyond policy enforcement to cultivating a learning culture that fosters resilience, creativity, and shared responsibility. Adaptive leadership here is defined as the capacity to reinterpret challenges in innovative ways rather than react passively. This approach enhances accreditation outcomes while preserving a humane and sustainable quality culture. Crucially, effective adaptive leadership also prioritizes the emotional, psychological, and professional well-being of teachers and students. As a result, empowered teachers exhibit greater commitment and creativity, and student well-being fosters a supportive learning environment. Thus, well-being surfaces as a key humanistic metric, ensuring that organizational transformation remains sustainable and centered on people.

This study advances understanding of adaptive leadership by demonstrating its critical role in fostering organizational learning, cultural transformation, and sustained quality improvement in Indonesian secondary schools, thereby offering a practical framework for educational leaders to enhance institutional resilience and accreditation outcomes. The findings imply that effective leadership transcends compliance, promoting reflective and collaborative cultures vital for continuous development. Nevertheless, the study's reliance on a single-case qualitative design constrains the generalizability of its conclusions across diverse educational contexts. Future research should incorporate multiple case studies across varied social and cultural settings and employ mixed-methods approaches to deepen and broaden empirical insights. Despite these limitations, the study makes a substantive theoretical contribution by emphasizing cultural change as a foundation for the effectiveness of adaptive leadership, providing valuable guidance for leadership development programs seeking to cultivate sustainable educational quality and innovation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the principal's adaptive leadership critically enhances organizational culture and achieves superior accreditation in secondary schools by implementing an integrated system of adaptive reflection, participatory collaboration, value transformation, and program innovation. These interconnected processes form an organizational learning cycle that fosters resilience, innovation, and shared responsibility, enabling schools to respond effectively to evolving educational policies and accreditation demands. Conceptually, the research extends the understanding of adaptive leadership by emphasizing cultural transformation over structural changes within the Indonesian educational context. Practically, it offers a valuable framework for principals to cultivate a sustainable quality culture grounded in collaboration and continuous improvement. Although based on a single case, the findings provide

empirical evidence supporting the broader applicability of adaptive leadership models to enhance educational quality and institutional competitiveness. This reinforces the principal's role as both a change agent and a facilitator of organizational learning, highlighting the importance of reflective and inclusive leadership in achieving lasting educational excellence.

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