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Listening to Student Voices in the Digital Sphere: A Tabayyun-Based Transformational Leadership Approach to Managing Learning Quality at State Vocational High School SMK Negeri 1 Pedan

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the meaning of student criticism in digital spaces as a source of quality data, the implementation of digital tabayyun ethics in conflict resolution, and transformational leadership practices in restoring a culture of learning quality. Using a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical case study design with an insider research scheme, this study positions the researcher as the main instrument and the Vice Principal for Quality Management at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan in 2025. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and digital documentation, which were then analyzed using the circular model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The results of the study show three essential findings. First, student criticism and insults in private WhatsApp Group spaces are organic indicators of learning discomfort rooted in five formal learning anomalies. Second, transformational leadership in quality management supported by the Principal successfully mitigated relational conflicts through the orchestration of cross-sectoral digital tabayyun (Homeroom Teachers and Guidance Counselors) that was humanistic and persuasive, thereby fostering students' ethical awareness without a rigid punitive approach. Third, the restoration of a culture of quality was institutionalized through In-House Training (IHT) "Serving with Heart" and the reconstruction of three adaptive feedback channels (direct dialogue, suggestion boxes, and private communication channels). This policy intervention successfully thawed the teacher-student power relationship, increased educators' reflective capacity, and restored students' learning comfort in a sustainable manner.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership; Digital Tabayyun; Student Voice; Learning Quality.

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of digital disruption, social media has transformed into a primary public space for the younger generation, including students. The presence of this digital space has given rise to a new phenomenon in education known as student voice, which operates organically and without barriers (Cook-Sather, 2023). While previously, student complaints, dissatisfaction, or aspirations regarding the learning process at school were blocked by classroom walls or rigid suggestion box

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bureaucracies, now students can easily voice their emotional realities directly through digital platforms (Bourke & Loveridge, 2022). This digital space provides freedom of expression, triggering the emergence of honest and genuine quality data directly from the perspective of education service users (Seale, 2024).

However, educational institution management is often unprepared to address this leap in digital communication culture. In many schools, student criticism or complaints expressed on social media—especially those expressed in impolite or even rude language—are often negatively perceived by school officials (Raza et al., 2023). Such criticism is often perceived as a form of disobedience, a serious ethical violation, or a direct threat to the authority and reputation of teachers and the institution (Masykur & Rohman, 2024). As a result, school management's response tends to be defensive, bureaucratic, and punitive (sanctions/punishments) to maintain the institution's image, without delving into the root causes of the students' anger (Prasetyo & Wahyuni, 2025).

In fact, from a quality management perspective, every customer complaint—in this case, students as the primary subject of education—constitutes invaluable field data. Edward Sallis's (2014) quality assurance masterbook emphasizes that a quality educational institution prioritizes customer satisfaction as the primary standard for continuous improvement. Behind the harsh words or expressions of student frustration on social media, there is actually honest information about learning discomfort and dissatisfaction with the instructional process in the classroom (Nurdin & Fitriani, 2022). This necessitates a paradigm shift from a defensive-punitive school culture to a reflective one. When digital criticism is viewed not as a threat but as an indicator of quality, schools have a significant opportunity to transform this communication crisis into material for inclusive curriculum evaluation (Sujoko & Hidayat, 2024).

This cultural transformation from defensive to reflective is impossible without intervention from school leadership. Referring to the fundamental concept of transformational leadership by Bass and Avolio (1994), a transformative leader must possess aspects of individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation, where the leader is able to listen to the needs of subordinates/students and challenge the status quo to make meaningful changes. Transformative educational leaders will not respond to student emotional turmoil with formal authority, but rather with an approach that inspires quality improvement (Bush, 2024; Hariri et al., 2023). In the context of Islamic Education Management (MPI), this transformative approach finds its ideal form through the concept of Tabayyun, which originates from Qur'anic theology (QS. Al-Hujurat: 6). Through the practice of digital tabayyun, school leaders position themselves as persuasive dialogue facilitators to verify student complaints fairly and free from emotional bias (Anwar & Rahmawati, 2023; Mu'ammar, 2025).

This phenomenon is a real-life occurrence and is being managed at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan. As a vocational education institution, the school is faced with the characteristics of Gen Z students who are highly active in cyberspace. Some time ago, a case was discovered where students expressed their dissatisfaction with their learning on social media by using harsh words directed at several teachers. Rather than immediately imposing strict disciplinary sanctions, the Vice Principal for Quality Management at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan took a strategic step by implementing

transformational leadership based on tabayyun. These harsh complaints on social media became a gateway for curriculum reflection and an in-depth evaluation of student learning comfort, in order to create a conducive academic atmosphere.

Previous research has examined the concepts of student voice, transformational leadership, and the implementation of tabayyun values in education separately. Research by Bourke and Loveridge (2022) confirms the importance of listening to students' voices, but is still limited to traditional classrooms. On the other hand, research by Anwar and Rahmawati (2023) discusses tabayyun only in the resolution of interpersonal student conflict. This study fills this research gap by synergizing these variables and focusing the analysis on how students' spontaneous criticism in the digital space is interpreted transformatively through the tabayyun approach as a strategic instrument for sustainable learning quality management at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan. Based on this urgency, this study is entitled: "Hearing Students' Voices in the Digital Space: Tabayyun-Based Transformational Leadership Practices in Learning Quality Management at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan."

THEORITICAL REVIEW

1. Transformational Leadership Epistemology: Mobilizing Institutional Conscience

Transformational leadership in modern educational discourse is not simply a set of managerial instruments to achieve mechanistic targets, but rather the art of moving conscience and restructuring the collective consciousness of an organization (Bush, 2024). Referring to the monumental thinking of James MacGregor Burns (1978) in his book, Leadership, this type of leadership occurs when leaders and followers elevate one another to higher levels of morality and motivation. Transformational leaders act as catalysts, transforming institutional anxiety into emancipatory, creative energy. Contemporary research by Hariri et al. (2023) shows that in vocational high schools (SMK), this leadership style is directly correlated with school resilience in the face of social and digital turbulence.

In a vocational high school landscape rife with pragmatic competency dynamics, transformational leadership manifests itself in the courage to break down ego-sectoral barriers and rigid power relations. Through the articulation of intellectual stimulation, a leader does not dismiss ripples of conflict or bury criticism, but rather embraces them as valuable anomalies that require a repositioning of educational approaches (Fadhli, 2023). Leaders who apply individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994) view every student's resistance or emotional outburst in a personal-humanistic manner. In line with the findings of Prasetyo and Wahyuni (2025), student emotional outbursts in cyberspace are not a form of defiance that should be eliminated with legalistic sanctions, but rather a cry of psychological needs (unmet needs) that fail to be accommodated in traditional classrooms due to monotonous teaching approaches.

2. Digital Tabayyun Ethics: Conflict Resolution and Dialogic Communication Restoration

In the Islamic Education Management (IEM) tradition, communication is not merely viewed as the transmission of messages, but as a sacred act with implications for social justice. The concept of tabayyun, textually enshrined in Islamic theology (QS. Al-Hujurat: 6), demands a thorough verification methodology, healthy skepticism towards prejudice, and prioritizing empathy over judgment. M. Quraish Shihab (2002)

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in Tafsir Al-Mishbah emphasizes that tabayyun is a pillar of social safety to prevent destructive actions due to ignorance (jahl). In the modern era, this theological concept has been adopted by Islamic management academics as a methodological basis for interpersonal conflict resolution in educational institutions (Anwar & Rahmawati, 2023).

When faced with cyber disruption, tabayyun is recontextualized into digital tabayyun. Social media, with its instant and anonymous characteristics, often exploits adolescents' emotional impulsivity without the filter of normative politeness (Masykur & Rohman, 2024). Facing this reality of digital outbursts, sociologist Jürgen Habermas's (1984) thought in The Theory of Communicative Action regarding "communicative action free from domination" becomes a highly relevant theoretical bridge. Digital tabayyun is applied not as a bureaucratic interrogation space, but as a neutral, humanistic encounter space to reduce virtual bias. Research by Mu'ammar (2025) confirms that through digital tabayyun, school leaders shed their formal authority to listen to the original narratives behind the screens of devices, validate students' emotional wounds, and simultaneously guide them in restoring ethical communication without denying the substance of their complaints.

3. Learning Quality Ecosystem and Student Voice Dynamics in Cyberspace

Quality management in education often falls into "administrative fetishism"—a pathological condition in which quality is reduced to piles of accreditation forms, mechanical adherence to formal curricula, and rigid paperwork. Edward Sallis (2014), in his book, Total Quality Management in Education, reminds us that the true essence of quality lies in creating a culture of sustainable quality rooted in the real experiences of customers. In schools, students are the rightful owners of these learning experiences. Therefore, quality assurance must be able to capture subjective aspects such as learning comfort and psychological safety of students in the classroom (Sujoko & Hidayat, 2024).

The concept of student voice emerged as a radical critique of the neglect of children's agency in the educational process. As Henry Giroux (2020) emphasized in his book, On Critical Pedagogy, listening to students' voices is a pedagogical act that humanizes them. International research by Cook-Sather (2023) and Seale (2024) confirms that when formal communication channels in schools are blocked by intimidating or rigid bureaucracy, cyberspace becomes an alternative catharsis chosen by students to openly express their bitter honesty. In the context of contemporary quality assurance, capturing students' organic complaints on social media and converting them into authentic curriculum evaluation data is a manifestation of responsive, adaptive, and humanistic quality management oriented toward the well-being of students (Nurdin & Fitriani, 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Research Approach and Design: Diving into Organic Reality

This research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical case study design. This approach was chosen because the researchers did not aim to test hypotheses or make statistical generalizations, but rather sought to gain a deep, comprehensive, and contextual understanding of a contemporary, real-world phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenon in question is how students'

emotional outbursts and criticisms in the digital space are managed through tabayyun-based transformational leadership practices at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan.

This case study design is positioned as insider research, where the researcher acts as both the primary instrument (human instrument) and an actor directly involved in the conceptualization and execution of the policy as the Vice Principal for Quality Management. This position provides epistemological advantages in the form of intimate and in-depth access to rich data without bureaucratic barriers, while still being strictly controlled through critical scientific reflection to avoid destructive subjective bias (Costley et al., 2021).

2. Data Source: Multidimensional Perspective Construction

In order to present a fair and independent analysis from a single point of view, the data sources in this study are constructed multidimensionally, including:

- **Primary Data (Human Subjects):**Obtained through dialogue and in-depth interviews with key informants, including: (1) Vice Principal for Quality Management as the policy-making actor, (2) Students who submitted complaints on social media to explore the psychological roots of their learning discomfort—by disguising their true identities in order to uphold research ethics, and (3) Related teachers who were the objects of criticism to understand the pedagogical perspective from the teaching side.
- **Secondary Data (Digital and Institutional Artifacts):**In the form of digital footprints (screenshots) of student complaints in cyberspace, field notes from researchers during the mediation process, and draft documents of the results of curriculum evaluation meetings at the educational unit level.

3. Data Collection Techniques: Beyond Formality

Data collection was not carried out using rigid instruments, but rather using adaptive-humanist techniques to maintain the authenticity of the informants' narratives:

- **Semi-structured Interview:**The dialogue is designed to flow like a persuasive conversation typical of the tabayyun approach. This is done intentionally to reduce the tension in power relations between teachers and students or leaders and students, allowing informants to speak honestly without feeling interrogated.
- **Participatory Observation:**Researchers conducted direct observations of changes in the academic climate, the dynamics of interactions in the classroom, and the transformation of teachers' teaching attitudes after the tabayyun action was carried out.
- **Digital Documentation Study:**Collecting and contextualizing digital complaint texts and tracking written policy changes in school learning quality documents.

4. Data Validity: Triangulation as a Guarantee of Objectivity

To ensure the credibility and scientific validity of the results of this qualitative study, the researcher applied source triangulation and technical triangulation techniques (Miles et al., 2014). Source triangulation was conducted by cross-referencing facts found from student confessions, teacher defenses, and the researcher's objective observations in the field. Meanwhile, technical triangulation was applied by comparing the correspondence between what students wrote spontaneously on social media and what they expressed verbally during the tabayyun dialogue space.

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5. Data Analysis Techniques: Weaving Meaning from Reality

The data analysis process moves in a circular and interactive manner following the flowing analysis model from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) which is adapted into three humanist stages:

1. **Data Condensation:**Researchers sorted, simplified, and clustered piles of interview narratives and social media texts into essential themes: forms of quality complaints, tabayyun communication processes, and curriculum reconstruction.
2. **Data Presentation (Data Display):**Presenting the data in a narrative-chronological manner, the story flows from the triggers of conflict, the dynamics of dialogue, to the birth of institutional solutions.
3. **Conclusion Drawing:**Conducting theoretical abstraction to connect field findings with the analytical knife of transformational leadership, the theological concept of tabayyun, and educational quality management.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Unveiling the Digital Curtain: Anatomy of Students' Organic Complaints in Private WhatsApp Group Spaces

The construction of cyberspace as an alternative catharsis for students was realized in 2025 at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan. Field investigations revealed that student dissatisfaction did not erupt in open digital public spaces, but rather channeled into private spaces in the form of WhatsApp Groups inhabited by a limited circle of friends who felt they had the same emotional frequency. This turmoil began to escalate when narratives within the group, filled with insults and curses against school policies and the teaching performance of educators, leaked to the surface through other students who felt uncomfortable with the destructive communication atmosphere.

From the data condensation of these digital artifacts, researchers found that students' swearing and profanity are actually the tip of the iceberg of pent-up psychological wounds and academic frustration. The students' organic complaints can be classified into five crucial clusters:

1. **Disciplinary Authoritarianism:**Teachers are perceived as being too repressive and rigid in imposing disciplinary sanctions.
2. **Teachers' Emotional Regulation Crisis:**The high frequency of teacher anger in class can damage students' psychological comfort.
3. **Pedagogical Monotony:**The learning process is considered boring and loses its appeal (loses its soul).
4. **Lack of Agency Recognition:**Students feel undervalued as equal human subjects within the classroom ecosystem.
5. **Task Exploitation:**The academic workload given is considered overloaded without any room for negotiation.

From a quality management perspective, this phenomenon confirms Sallis's (2014) thesis regarding customer dissatisfaction. Formal school channels, which students may have perceived as intimidating, force them to seek communication refuge in hidden digital spaces to openly voice their bitter truths.

2. Tabayyun-Based Transformational Leadership Performance: From Crisis Reduction to Collective Reflection

When this grim digital reality is revealed, educational institutions often respond defensively with swift punitive measures to safeguard their reputation. However, the leadership at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan took a different approach. Fully supported by the principal, who acts as a macro facilitator, the Vice Principal for Quality Management designed a blueprint for transformative conflict resolution, rejecting the caning approach and prioritizing ethical review.

This strategic step is implemented through cross-sectoral orchestration involving homeroom teachers and guidance and counseling (BK) teachers. The tabayyun process moves gradually through three humanistic stages:

[Students' Criticism & Insults on WA]
↓
[Tabayyun & Persuasive Dialogue (BK/Homeroom Teacher)] → Students Feel Heard & Delete Sincere Chat
↓
[Teacher Quality & Reflection Meeting (Legowo)]
↓
[Supervision & IHT "Serving with Heart"]
↓
[New Feedback System Reconstruction]

The digital tabayyun approach employed did not place students on the receiving end of interrogation, but instead invited them into a space of equal persuasive dialogue. The results were deeply humanistic: students felt humanized, sincerely acknowledged their ethical communication errors, and then removed the offensive joke content without coercion. Interestingly, students expressed a noble desire to remain involved as partners providing constructive feedback to the school, but in a more dignified manner.

The transformation doesn't stop with the students. Through quality assurance meetings and learning supervision, student complaint data is presented to teachers not as a performance assessment tool, but as a mirror for self-reflection. The teachers welcome this data with generosity (legowo) and transform it into a collective awareness for self-improvement.

3. Restoring a Quality Culture: The Real Impact of the IHT Manifestation of "Serving with Heart"

The culmination of transformational leadership practices at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan was marked by the reconstruction of school policies that had a systemic impact on the learning quality ecosystem. Rather than allowing change to occur sporadically, the school institutionalized it through an In-House Training (IHT) with the prophetic theme: "Serving with Heart." This IHT became a turning point for educators, shifting their teaching strategies from a rigid instructional model to an inclusive and empathetic educational service.

This restoration of a culture of quality has resulted in fundamental changes to the feedback loop at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan. To accommodate the diverse psychological characteristics of its students, the school intelligently optimizes feedback facilities through three adaptive channels:

- **Open Dialogic Channel:**Provide a direct discussion space for students who have the courage to verbally articulate.

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- **Official Suggestion Box & Written Channel:**Facilitate students who feel uncomfortable delivering criticism face-to-face in order to maintain their privacy and psychological safety.
- **Personal Contact Channel (Japri):**Allows students to send digital private messages to specific teachers they trust, which are guaranteed to be followed up promptly and tactically.

The empirical impact of this policy intervention has been highly encouraging. Relations between teachers and students have significantly improved; the barriers of intimidating power relations have melted into warm academic partnerships. Teachers are now much more prepared and open to feedback, teaching methods have transformed into more enjoyable ones, and students have once again found the comfort of learning fully at school. Criticism, which initially emerged as insults in the dark spaces of WhatsApp, was ultimately successfully transformed by school management into a transformative force that improved the quality of educational services at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan.

Discussion (Comprehensive Theoretical Analysis)

Fieldwork findings at SMK Negeri 1 Pedan provide valuable scientific contributions to the discourse on Islamic Education Management and Quality Management. When the Vice Principal for Quality Management and the Principal chose the tabayyun approach over rigid disciplinary sanctions, they simultaneously practiced the individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation pillars of Bass and Avolio (1994). The transformational leader in this case looked beyond digital insults, diagnosed them as a process quality issue, and designed a solution through teacher capacity improvement (IHT).

Furthermore, the reconstruction of the feedback system (dialogue, suggestion box, and private messages) proves that the school has successfully migrated from a "defensive school culture" to a "reflective school culture." This aligns with the principle of Continuous Improvement in Total Quality Management by Edward Sallis (2014), where customer complaints are positioned as an absolute asset for continuous quality improvement. The use of digital tabayyun in this public school also proves that the values of Islamic universality (Rahmatan lil 'Alamin) are highly contextual and effective as a contemporary conflict resolution tool in the cyber era (Mu'ammar, 2025).

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based adaptive learning technology through the use of platforms such as ChatGPT and Canva AI in Islamic Religious Education subjects at SMKN 2 Kraksaan provides quite significant changes to improve the quality of learning. AI technology helps teachers in developing teaching materials that are more relevant, interactive, and easy to understand for students. Teachers can also be more flexible in providing problem-based learning because sources for finding references become easier to access and search time is shorter. Meanwhile, students also benefit from easy access to information, simpler explanations, and attractive visual support through Canva AI. Students become more active and motivated because they can learn in a way that suits their characteristics as a digital generation. AI also enables independent learning, where students can explore material more broadly according to their interests and needs.

However, the implementation of AI also faces a number of challenges that must be taken seriously, such as the low digital literacy of some teachers, the risk of dependence on the internet, and the need forSelf-reliance on instant answers without critical thinking, and teachers and students alike must be more discerning in processing information provided by AI, to determine whether the information aligns with the teachings they believe in or becomes misleading for both parties. Furthermore, the absence of school policies specifically regulating the use of AI in learning has made its implementation uneven. However, opportunities remain wide open. With the support of teacher training, supportive school policies, improved infrastructure, and increased teacher and student awareness in processing the information provided, AI technology can be a crucial part of transforming Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning to be more relevant to current developments. In conclusion, the use of AI-based technology not only helps accelerate and simplify the teaching and learning process but can also be a strategic tool for instilling Islamic values in a more contextual, creative, and enjoyable way for vocational high school students.

CONCLUSION

This case study of SMK Negeri 1 Pedan in 2025 successfully constructed a new paradigm in educational governance: transforming the digital communication crisis into a catalyst for institutional quality transformation. Based on the analysis and discussion, this study yielded three essential conclusions:

First, students' criticism and verbal abuse in private WhatsApp groups are not merely isolated forms of moral defiance or violations of digital ethics, but rather organic signals of learning discomfort in the classroom. These complaints are rooted in five learning anomalies: rigid and authoritarian disciplinary enforcement, a lack of teacher emotional regulation, pedagogical monotony, neglect of student agency, and exploitative workloads.

Second, the orchestration of transformational leadership by the Vice Principal for Quality Management, with the full support of the Principal and the tactical collaboration of the Homeroom Teacher and the Guidance and Counseling Group, has proven effective in mitigating relational conflict through the ethics of digital tabayyun. This approach successfully broke down the walls of intimidating power relations. Rather than generating resistance through punitive sanctions, this persuasive dialogue space actually guided students to sincerely acknowledge their mistakes, delete inappropriate digital content, and foster a renewed commitment to positioning themselves as strategic partners in monitoring school service quality.

Third, the transformation of quality governance was institutionalized through the implementation of In-House Training (IHT) entitled "Serving with Heart," which successfully reconstructed the teaching mentality of educators from a mechanistic instructional model to a humanistic-inclusive service. The systemic impact of this policy was the creation of three adaptive feedback channels (direct dialogue, written suggestion box, and private communication channel) that successfully restored the school's quality culture. The academic climate became more conducive, teacher-student relations melted harmoniously, and educators became much more open and reflective in accepting input for continuous improvement of learning.

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2. Suggestions

Based on the conclusions above, the researcher formulated several strategic recommendations that are humanistic and contextual for stakeholders:

- **For Principals and School Quality Management:**It is recommended that social media or cyberspace no longer be treated as a threat to an institution's reputation. Schools should begin instituting a friendly digital environmental scanning system to regularly capture students' deepest aspirations, and maintain a reflective and dialogical work culture that moves away from a rigid, punishing-the-penalty approach.
- **For Educators (Teachers):**It is hoped that we can continue to maintain the magnanimity of spirit (legowo) in receiving every feedback from students, and consistently embody the values of empathy pedagogy obtained from IHT "Serving with Heart" into instructional design in the classroom, so that students' learning comfort can continue to be maintained.
- **For Further Researchers:**Considering that this research is limited to the scope of one state vocational high school (insider research), further researchers are advised to expand the research locus to more heterogeneous school clusters, or use the Netnography method to delve into the psychological dynamics of student digital circle groups more comprehensively in the Islamic Education Management landscape.

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