


One Role, Different Expectations: Exploring Teacher Perspectives on Principal Leadership in Indonesian Schools

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history Received May 12, 2025 Revised June 15, 2025 Accepted June 29, 2025	<p>This study explores how teachers across different educational levels in Indonesia perceive the ideal characteristics of a school principal. Using an exploratory descriptive design, data were gathered from 1,594 teachers in Lampung Province through an online semi-structured survey. The open-ended responses were thematically analyzed to identify the dominant traits teachers associate with effective leadership. Six recurring themes emerged: assertiveness, wisdom, nurturing, discipline, responsibility, and open-mindedness. However, the emphasis on each trait varied by school level. Elementary teachers prioritized emotional and nurturing leadership; junior high teachers emphasized firmness and structure, while senior high teachers favored democratic and wise leadership. Findings suggest that leadership expectations are shaped by contextual factors such as school level, teacher maturity, and institutional culture. These results align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Hallinger's instructional leadership model, highlighting the importance of adaptive, relationship-based leadership. The study calls for leadership development programs that are differentiated and context sensitive. By integrating teacher perspectives, educational leaders can better align their practices with school-specific needs, enhancing both teacher engagement and school climate.</p>
Keywords Instructional Leadership Teacher Perception School Level Sociocultural Theory	

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I. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of 21st-century education, school leadership is recognized as one of the most critical levers for improving student learning outcomes (Dube, 2025; Effendi et al., 2020; McMahan & Torrance, 2023). International reports from the OECD and UNESCO emphasize the importance of instructional leadership, where principals function not merely as administrators but as key agents shaping teaching quality and learning culture (Idris et al., 2025; Maheshwari & Korla, 2025). Evidence consistently shows that effective leadership enhances school performance, strengthens teacher motivation, and supports student achievement (Munna, 2023; Puruwita et al., 2022).

While these global priorities highlight the urgency of developing strong instructional leaders, Indonesia continues to face persistent educational challenges that hinder the achievement of such goals (Retnosari et al., 2023). Despite policy reforms aimed at broadening access, results from PISA 2022 indicate that fewer than one in five Indonesian students achieved minimum competence in mathematics, with similarly low results in reading and science (Andi Rachman et al., 2021; Fauzan et al., 2025).

Findings from the 2025 Rapor Pendidikan, the official national education report published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, also reveal wide disparities across regions and school types (Wijaya et al., 2024). These findings point to a crisis not of access but of quality and equity, underscoring the crucial role of principals in fostering supportive and effective learning environments (Aditia & Széll, 2025; Xhomara, 2021).

Government initiatives such as School-Based Management (SBM) were designed to empower schools through local autonomy (Ishii & Ogawa, 2024). Empirical studies, however, have reported mixed results regarding SBM's impact on learning outcomes, with many schools struggling to translate autonomy into improved teaching and student achievement (Bandur et al., 2022; Brunning et al., 2020). Leadership development programs also tend to adopt uniform approaches, neglecting the diverse contexts in which schools operate (Agus et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2020).

This raises an important but underexplored question: do teachers at different school levels expect the same qualities in a principal, or are their expectations shaped by institutional culture, professional maturity, and

psychosocial needs? This gap is critical because much of the Indonesian literature treats instructional leadership as a monolithic concept, rarely disaggregating findings by school level or directly incorporating teacher perspectives (Lumban Gaol, 2023; Pham et al., 2025). As frontline practitioners, teachers interact most closely with school leaders and are directly affected by their leadership styles, yet their voices are often absent in leadership discourse (Murendo et al., 2024).

Guided by instructional leadership theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Cong-Lem, 2025; Morgan & Cieminski, 2023), this study examines how teachers at the primary (SD), junior secondary (SMP), and senior secondary (SMA) levels in Lampung Province perceive the ideal characteristics of a school principal. By analyzing teachers' open-ended responses, the study seeks to capture context-specific expectations of leadership and reveal how these vary across educational levels (Lewis et al., 2025).

This research makes three main contributions. First, it provides empirical insights into teacher perceptions of principal leadership, a perspective often marginalized in existing studies. Second, it highlights the need for differentiated leadership development strategies that align with the psychological and professional needs of teachers at different levels. Third, it affirms the value of integrating sociocultural perspectives into leadership studies by demonstrating how local contexts shape professional expectations. Consequently, the study advances a more contextualized and responsive understanding of instructional leadership in Indonesia.

II. Method

A. Research Design

This study employed an exploratory-descriptive research design to examine teacher perceptions of ideal principal leadership traits across different educational levels, elementary (SD), junior high (SMP), and senior high schools (SMA) in Indonesia (Metaferia et al., 2023; Srivani & Murugappan, 2023). In this context, exploratory research refers to investigating relatively under-examined phenomena to gain initial insights and identify key concepts, while descriptive research aims to describe patterns or characteristics observed in the data systematically (Bessong, 2024; Da'as & Zibenberg, 2021). Combining these approaches allowed the study first to uncover implicit assumptions held by teachers and then to detail thematic consistencies across school levels.

Given that the present study sought to uncover implicit assumptions and preferences held by teachers regarding leadership characteristics without imposing pre-existing theoretical categories, a qualitative content analysis of open-ended responses was deemed most suitable. This approach allows researchers to inductively draw meaning from participants' own words and language (Bucher, 2021;

Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023), thereby aligning with the study's aim to capture grounded teacher voices.

The study did not seek to test hypotheses or measure the statistical significance of relationships between variables. Instead, it aimed to surface patterns and thematic consistencies from qualitative data, offering insight into how leadership is perceived and valued within different educational settings. Such an approach is critical in contexts like Indonesia, where socio-cultural nuances and localized institutional logics often shape educational leadership practices (Sary et al., 2024).

1) Participants and Samplings

The study sample comprised 1,594 teachers from elementary, junior high, and senior high schools across 15 districts and municipalities in Lampung Province, Indonesia. To maintain representative coverage, the researchers collaborated with local education offices and principal associations to distribute the survey broadly across urban and rural areas, public and private schools. This strategy helped ensure diverse instructional contexts and leadership exposures were included.

Purposive and convenience sampling techniques targeted teachers actively employed and involved in school activities during the 2024–2025 academic year. The participant composition was approximately 41.7% elementary, 34.2% junior high, and 24.1% senior high school teachers. Most participants had more than 10 years of teaching experience, enabling rich insights based on substantial professional familiarity with school leadership.

2) Instrumentation

Data were collected through an online, semi-structured questionnaire that served as the primary research instrument. The questionnaire consisted of one central open-ended question, "Please describe the characteristics of your ideal school principal," along with a short set of demographic items such as school level, years of experience, and school location. The open-ended question was intentionally designed to be broad and non-directive to elicit genuine and unconstrained responses, independent of any theoretical leadership frameworks.

The instrument was pilot tested with 20 teachers representing the target groups. The pilot evaluated clarity, relevance, and richness of responses; feedback indicated no substantial revisions were necessary. Although formal expert validation was not sought, pilot testing served as a practical content validation step.

B. Data Collection Procedures

The online questionnaire was distributed on December 30, 2024, via school networks, WhatsApp teacher groups, and professional mailing lists. The survey was hosted on a secure and mobile-friendly platform (Google Forms), which ensured easy access even for teachers in remote or rural areas.

Participants were informed of the study's aims, their rights to anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation. No personal identifiers were collected beyond basic demographic markers. Informed consent was obtained digitally at the beginning of the questionnaire.

A total of 1,594 usable responses were collected within a one-week window. The high response rate was likely facilitated by support from local education authorities and the relevance of the topic to teachers' professional concerns. All responses were stored securely in a password-protected database accessible only to the research team.

Ethical procedures were adhered to throughout the study. Although formal institutional ethical clearance was not required for this preliminary survey, the researchers followed ethical standards aligned with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Indonesian Code of Research Ethics (Parums, 2024).

C. Data Analysis

The open-ended responses were analyzed using qualitative thematic content analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (Pearson et al., 2025). The analysis process included familiarization with the data, initial open coding, generation of categories, identification of themes, refinement and naming of themes, and final reporting supported with illustrative excerpts.

To manage and organize data efficiently, NVivo 14 software was used for coding and theme generation. Each response was read multiple times, and meaning units that conveyed leadership attributes were extracted and coded into categories such as "wise," "firm," "nurturing," "open," "democratic," and "disciplined." These codes were then inductively clustered into six dominant themes representing leadership traits frequently mentioned across responses.

To ensure inter-coder reliability, two independent coders analyzed a subset of responses (n = 300), achieving 89% agreement. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus before finalizing the coding schema. The remaining data were then coded by the lead researcher using the refined schema.

To visualize the frequency and distribution of traits across school levels, a heatmap was generated using descriptive statistics and visual mapping techniques. Each cell in the heatmap reflected the frequency of a particular leadership trait in a specific school level, allowing for comparative pattern identification. For example, elementary school teachers frequently associated ideal leadership with relational attributes such as "caring" and "nurturing," whereas senior high school teachers emphasized "vision," "dialogue," and "democracy."

No inferential statistics were used, as the objective was to describe and interpret rather than to predict or

generalize. The goal was to provide a context-rich understanding of teacher perceptions that could inform future theory-building and leadership training designs.

III. Results and Discussion

A. Overview of Respondents and Data Collection

A total of 1,594 teachers from 15 districts and municipalities in Lampung Province participated in the survey, representing elementary (41.7%), junior high (34.2%), and senior high schools (24.1%). The sample reflected diversity in gender, teaching experience, and school location (urban-rural), enabling a robust comparative perspective across educational levels (Campbell et al., 2021).

Analysis of the open-ended responses generated rich qualitative data that revealed distinct yet overlapping expectations of principal leadership. Teachers frequently emphasized traits related to integrity, fairness, communication skills, emotional intelligence, and decisiveness. Using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, these attributes were clustered into six dominant themes that characterized the "ideal school principal" as perceived by teachers.

Analysis of teacher responses revealed clear patterns across school levels. Elementary school teachers tended to emphasize relational and nurturing qualities such as caring, patience, and approachability, reflecting their focus on students' social-emotional development. Junior high school teachers valued both relational and managerial attributes, frequently citing fairness, discipline, and collaboration to balance emotional support with classroom order. In contrast, senior high school teachers placed greater weight on visionary and democratic leadership, highlighting strategic thinking, openness to dialogue, and innovation. Selected teacher excerpts further illustrate how these themes are grounded in local educational realities, underscoring the importance of sociocultural sensitivity in leadership practices.

B. Emergent Themes in Teacher Perceptions

A total of 1,594 teachers from 15 districts/municipalities in Lampung Province participated in this survey, representing elementary schools (41.7%), junior high schools (34.2%), and senior high schools (24.1%). The sample reflected diversity in gender, teaching experience, and school location (urban-rural), allowing for robust comparative analysis across educational levels.

Analysis of the open-ended responses generated six key themes describing the "ideal school principal." These themes reflected both universal leadership values (such as responsibility and role modeling) and context-specific expectations shaped by the sociocultural and institutional realities of Indonesian schools.

Table 1. Themes in Teacher Perceptions

Theme	Description	Representative Quotes
Assertive	Principals are expected to be decisive and firm in enforcing school rules and policies.	“A leader must be firm, not hesitant in making decisions for the benefit of the school.”
Protective/Nurturing	Emphasizes care for teachers’ and students’ well-being, creating a safe and supportive school climate.	“An ideal principal is one who cares about the welfare of both teachers and students.”
Responsible	Demonstrates accountability, transparency, and trustworthiness in managing school resources.	“They must be trustworthy and honest in managing school funds.”
Wise	Shows moral integrity and the ability to make balanced decisions.	“Able to wisely resolve conflicts between teachers and students.”
Disciplined	Serves as a role model of punctuality, consistency, and adherence to school regulations.	“Becomes an example of discipline in time management and behavior.”
Open-minded	Welcomes teacher input and encourages innovation in teaching and learning.	“Willing to listen to teachers’ ideas and provide opportunities for innovation.”

Based on Table 1, each theme reflects a distinct dimension of leadership. Wisdom was frequently associated with ethical and reflective decision-making, while nurturing emphasized emotional support and relational closeness. Assertiveness reflected firmness and authority in maintaining school order, and discipline was linked to consistency in upholding standards. Meanwhile, responsibility signified reliability and accountability, whereas open-mindedness highlighted adaptability and receptiveness to teacher voices. This multidimensionality suggests that Indonesian teachers expect principals not to embody a singular leadership style, but rather to integrate emotional, moral, and managerial competencies in balanced ways.

Teachers’ narratives provide further nuance to these themes. Descriptions such as “*mengayomi seperti orang tua*” (nurturing like a parent) and “*tegas namun adil*” (firm yet fair) illustrate how leadership is understood relationally and culturally. These insights underscore that teachers’ perceptions are not abstract ideals but are grounded in daily professional interactions and the sociocultural environment of Indonesian schools.

C. Variation Across School Levels

A notable finding is the variation in trait emphasis across school levels, as illustrated in Figure 1. The matrix below presents the *normalized frequency scores* of each theme, representing the proportion of responses mentioning a particular trait per 100 teachers within each school level. Scores above 1.0 indicate that a theme was mentioned *more frequently than the overall mean*, whereas scores below 1.0 indicate less frequent mention.

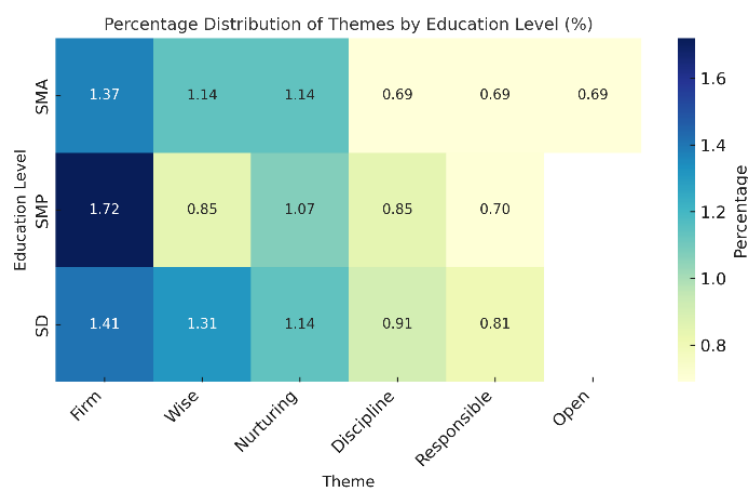


Fig. 1. Themes Distribution by School Level Based on Preliminary Survey in Lampung Province

At the elementary school (SD) level, teachers emphasized *nurturing* (normalized score = 1.14) and *assertiveness* (1.41) as the most salient traits. This pattern reflects the expectation of principals as protective and

emotionally supportive figures, often described as “nurturing like a parent.” Such emphasis aligns with the developmental needs of younger students and the

relational role teachers expect from school leaders (Klein & Bronnert-Härle, 2020).

In junior high schools (SMP), the strongest emphasis was placed on *assertiveness* (1.72) and *responsibility* (0.85). These findings suggest that principals are expected to provide firm direction and structured leadership during a transitional stage when students begin to test authority and teachers face increased classroom management challenges (Peña-Ruz & Asparó, 2024). Teachers frequently noted the importance of principals who are “firm in guiding increasingly critical adolescents.”

For senior high schools (SMA), the leadership traits most emphasized were wisdom (1.31) and open-mindedness (0.69). These qualities highlight the growing importance of intellectual maturity and ethical sensitivity in guiding older adolescents who are preparing for higher education and entry into broader society. Teachers perceived principals not merely as administrators, but as leaders who embody ethical reasoning, cultivate a culture of consultation, and practice dialogic leadership aligned with democratic values and the principles of professional autonomy. At this educational stage, the role of principals extends beyond functioning as protectors or disciplinarians; they are expected to emerge as visionary leaders capable of fostering reflective decision-making, encouraging intellectual discourse, and creating an environment where critical thinking, innovation, and participatory dialogue can flourish. Such leadership ultimately supports the development of both teachers and students as autonomous, responsible, and socially engaged individuals (Khaqan & Redondo-Sama, 2024).

These findings affirm that instructional leadership expectations in Indonesia are far from monolithic; rather, they evolve in accordance with the developmental stage of students and the professional culture of teachers. Although wisdom and nurturing emerged as consistently valued traits across all educational levels, their interpretations shifted markedly with context. At the elementary school (SD) level, these qualities were closely associated with care, protection, and the safeguarding of children’s early growth. In junior high schools (SMP), they were reinterpreted as firmness, order, and the capacity to maintain discipline during the turbulence of adolescence. By the senior high school (SMA) stage, however, the same traits were reframed to reflect ethical vision, intellectual guidance, and consultative leadership rooted in dialogue and shared decision-making. Such variation underscores the necessity of designing leadership development programs that are sensitive to context and adaptive to the unique challenges of each educational stage, rather than relying on a uniform, one-size-fits-all model of principal preparation.

D. Linking Traits to School Climate and Culture

Qualitative evidence from teacher responses underscores how leadership traits are embedded within the

school climate and cultural context (Figure 2). At the elementary school (SD) level, principals were frequently described as “*mengayomi seperti orang tua*” (nurturing like a parent) and “*penuh pengertian*” (understanding). These expressions illustrate expectations for leaders who foster a safe emotional climate, emphasizing care, empathy, and wise guidance traits that align with the developmental needs of young learners and the affective support teachers seek in early education.

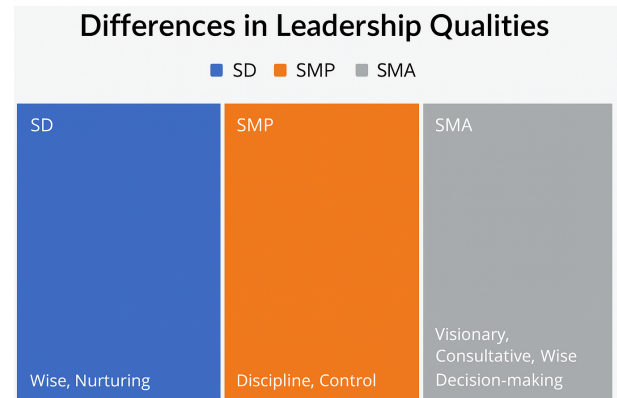


Fig. 2. Differences in leadership traits

In junior high schools (SMP), teachers consistently emphasized discipline and control. Effective principals were described as “*tegas dalam menghadapi siswa yang mulai kritis*” (firm in dealing with increasingly critical students). This reflects the psychosocial dynamics of adolescence, where students begin to challenge authority, requiring principals to ensure order and stability. Here, the school climate is shaped by the need for structured authority and consistent enforcement of rules, positioning principals as protectors of organizational discipline rather than purely relational figures.

By contrast, at the senior high school (SMA) level, teacher expectations shifted toward more abstract and aspirational qualities, such as being “*berwawasan*” (visionary), “*mampu berdialog*” (able to engage in dialogue), and “*bijak dalam mengambil keputusan*” (wise in decision-making). These traits highlight a preference for consultative and visionary leadership, reflecting both the professional autonomy of teachers at this level and the intellectual maturity of students. Principals are thus expected to act less as enforcers and more as instructional leaders who engage teachers in collaborative decision-making and long-term planning (Souza et al., 2025).

Taken together, these findings reinforce that instructional leadership is not uniform across school levels. Instead, it is a situated practice, evolving in response to the relational, emotional, and pedagogical demands of each educational stage (Bolyard et al., 2025). Elementary schools require emotionally intelligent leadership, junior high schools prioritize authoritative and structured leadership, and senior high schools expect consultative and visionary leadership. Recognizing these distinctions is crucial for designing context-sensitive

leadership development programs, ensuring that principals are prepared to adapt their style to the climate and culture of their schools (Hsieh et al., 2025).

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of instructional leadership in Indonesian schools (Alqahtani et al., 2021; Jasman et al., 2024). Although six dominant traits, assertiveness, wisdom, nurturing, discipline, responsibility, and open-mindedness, were consistently mentioned across school levels, their relative emphasis differed significantly between elementary (SD), junior high (SMP), and senior high (SMA). These variations underscore that school leadership should not be understood as a static or universal construct, but rather as a socially constructed and contextually situated practice.

At the elementary level, teachers emphasized nurturing and wise leadership, reflecting expectations for emotionally intelligent principals who can create safe and supportive learning environments (Widiyan et al., 2020). This finding resonates with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learning occurs through scaffolding provided by more capable others (Lambright, 2024). Principals at this stage are thus perceived as *caregivers* and *pedagogical partners*, balancing structure with empathy. Such expectations are consistent with studies in other Southeast Asian contexts (Cong-Lem & Daneshfar, 2024; Nardo, 2021), which show that in collectivist cultures, early education leadership often prioritizes relational harmony and moral character.

In junior high schools, assertiveness and control emerged as dominant expectations. This reflects the psychosocial dynamics of adolescence, when students increasingly challenge authority and teachers require strong institutional support (Amzat et al., 2022; Shaked, 2024). Teachers, therefore, view principals as disciplinarians and protectors of order. This aligns with Ariffin & Yusoff, (2023) the argument that leadership effectiveness is contingent on institutional context and psychosocial conditions. It also echoes findings from Malaysia and Vietnam, where middle school principals are expected to enforce discipline while balancing academic goals (Yuniar Diyanti & Madya, 2021).

At the senior high school level, teachers emphasized wisdom, dialogue, and openness indicating a shift toward consultative and visionary leadership. Here, principals are expected to engage in ethical decision-making and collaborative vision-building, reflecting a mature professional culture where teachers value autonomy and intellectual exchange. This perspective aligns with Khaqan and Redondo-Sama, (2024) the framework of leadership content knowledge, emphasizing principals' ability to guide substantive instructional dialogue. Similar patterns are observed in Thailand and the Philippines, where high school principals are seen less as authority

figures and more as democratic facilitators (Demir & Kalman, 2025).

These cross-level differences demonstrate why one-size-fits-all leadership models are problematic. The same trait, such as assertiveness, may carry different meanings across contexts: in SMP, it signifies discipline and order, while in SMA, it may be perceived as authoritarian if overemphasized. This challenges dominant universalist models of instructional leadership and highlights the need for a situated approach that adapts to cultural, institutional, and developmental conditions (Alkaabi, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings strengthen the alignment between Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Hallinger and Murphy's instructional leadership model (Nardo, 2021). Principals, like teachers, act as scaffolds: providing structure when needed but gradually fostering agency as teachers gain professional maturity. This also reflects the cultural dimension of leadership in Indonesia, where authority is legitimized not only by managerial competence but also by moral integrity and relational harmony (Sary et al., 2024).

The study carries important practical implications. Current leadership training in Indonesia emphasizes administrative compliance and supervisory functions, but these findings suggest the need for differentiated professional development. For example, principals in elementary schools should be trained in emotional literacy and nurturing practices, while those in junior high schools require skills in discipline and organizational management (Prianto & Qomariyah, 2022). At the senior high level, training should prioritize visionary leadership, instructional coaching, and democratic decision-making. These differentiated approaches align with the demands of Kemdikbud's school leadership reform agenda, which must move beyond uniform modules toward context-sensitive leadership programs (Abdallah & Alkaabi, 2023; Ni et al., 2023).

At the same time, leadership traits must be interpreted through the sociocultural lens of collectivist societies, where wisdom and nurturing are consistently valued across levels but manifested differently (Noor & Nawab, 2022). This underscores that leadership effectiveness depends not only on the traits principals possess, but also on how those traits are enacted within the professional subculture of the school.

Finally, this study also underscores the significance of teacher perspectives. Much prior research in Indonesia has focused on policy analysis or principals' self-reports. By incorporating teacher voices, this study demonstrates that teachers are not passive recipients of leadership but active co-constructors of school culture (Dube, 2025). Their expectations shape both their engagement and their interpretations of principal actions. Ignoring these perspectives risks misalignment between leadership intent and school climate outcomes.

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study was conducted in a single province, limiting generalizability to the national level. Data collection through an online survey may have introduced bias toward digitally literate teachers, while the reliance on descriptive thematic analysis limits the depth of causal inference. Future research should adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal designs, combining qualitative insights with inferential testing to examine how teacher perceptions evolve and how they impact measurable outcomes such as student achievement or and teacher retention. Comparative studies across provinces or countries would also help situate Indonesian findings within broader regional and global debates.

IV. Conclusion

This exploratory study examined teacher perceptions of ideal school principal characteristics across elementary, junior high, and senior high schools in Lampung, Indonesia. Findings from the preliminary survey involving 1,594 teachers reveal six dominant leadership traits: assertiveness, wisdom, nurturing, discipline, responsibility, and open-mindedness, with differing emphasis across school levels. Elementary teachers emphasized nurturing and wise leadership; junior high teachers preferred firm and structured leadership, while senior high teachers valued wisdom and dialogic engagement. These results affirm the view that instructional leadership is not a static construct but a context-dependent and socially constructed practice. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Hallinger's instructional leadership model jointly support the interpretation of principals as scaffolding agents, whose effectiveness relies on their ability to adapt leadership practices to the professional, psychological, and institutional needs of teachers. The study highlights the need for differentiated leadership development programs and calls for greater inclusion of teacher voices in leadership discourse. By shifting from universal models to context-responsive practices, Indonesian school leadership can become more effective, equitable, and aligned with the realities of its educational landscape.

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