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Leadership in Action: Exploring Teacher Perceptions of Elementary School Principals in Rural Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Effective principal leadership is critical for educational quality, yet empirical research on elementary school leadership in rural Indonesian contexts remains limited. This study examines teacher perceptions of principal leadership effectiveness across three core dimensions: personality traits, task implementation, and social relationship capabilities. The research was conducted in Nibung District, Musi Rawas Utara Regency, a rural area with diverse educational characteristics. A quantitative descriptive approach was employed, surveying 60 teachers selected through proportional random sampling from 238 elementary school teachers. Data were collected using validated questionnaires demonstrating strong psychometric properties (Cronbach's α = 0.832-0.856; CVI = 0.89) and analyzed using percentage techniques. Results indicate consistently positive teacher perceptions across all dimensions: personality (84%), task implementation (81.5%), and social capabilities (82.5%). Principals demonstrated particular strengths in providing responsible autonomy, modeling accountability, and building collaborative environments. However, areas requiring enhancement were identified in readiness planning, goal achievement encouragement, and conflict management capabilities. This study makes significant contributions to educational leadership literature by providing an integrated multidimensional analysis of principal competencies within rural Indonesian contexts—an understudied area in Southeast Asian educational research. The novelty lies in examining the intersection of teacher perceptions, leadership competency dimensions, and rural contextual factors. Findings provide empirical foundations for policy development and targeted professional development programs, particularly addressing strategic planning, motivational coaching, and conflict resolution competencies essential for sustainable elementary school improvement in resource-constrained rural settings.

Keywords*: *rural education, educational leadership, principal competence, teacher perception, elementary school leadership, Indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

Principal leadership is a key factor determining the quality of education in schools. Principals serve not only as administrators but also as instructional leaders, guiding the school's vision, mission, and strategies to achieve optimal educational goals (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). Global research shows that the quality of school leadership contributes significantly to teacher performance, school climate, and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, the role of the principal is regulated in the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 13 of 2007 (Permendiknas, 2007), which requires mastery of managerial, supervisory, entrepreneurial, personality, and social competencies. However, challenges in its implementation remain, particularly in aspects of program innovation, teacher empowerment, and adaptation to changing times (Minsh et al., 2019). In this context, teacher perceptions are crucial because they are the principal's direct partners who can assess leadership effectiveness factually (Bush & Glover, 2020).

Several previous studies have shown that effective principal leadership is characterized by the ability to build trust, provide professional support, and create a collaborative climate in schools (C. Day et al., 2016; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). Principals who are able to manage interpersonal relationships well tend to be more successful in motivating teachers and managing change (Nguyen et al., 2020). However, studies also

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show variations in teacher perceptions influenced by the principal's background, experience, school organizational culture, and leadership style (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2019).

Although research on educational leadership has grown rapidly internationally, there are several significant knowledge gaps (research gaps), particularly in the Indonesian context. First, most school leadership studies focus on urban or semi-urban contexts, while empirical research on leadership dynamics in rural elementary schools facing resource constraints and geographic isolation remains very limited (García-Garnica et al., 2022; Young et al., 2021). Rural schools, however, have unique characteristics that differentiate them from urban schools, including smaller community sizes, greater reliance on principal leadership, and dual expectations from the local community.

Second, although Indonesian education policy has established comprehensive principal competency standards through Ministerial Regulation No. 13/2007, empirical validation of the implementation and effectiveness of these standards in rural elementary schools remains rare. Consequently, it remains unclear which competency dimensions have been effectively implemented and which require strengthening in the specific context of rural Indonesia.

Third, most leadership research uses a single-dimensional approach for example, focusing solely on managerial competencies or personality aspects without integrating a multidimensional analysis that encompasses personality characteristics, task performance, and social skills simultaneously within a specific cultural context. Such an integrative approach is crucial for understanding how various dimensions of leadership interact and contribute to overall leadership effectiveness.

Fourth, the perspective of teachers as direct evaluators of principal leadership remains underutilized in educational leadership research in Indonesia. Yet, teachers hold a unique position as daily partners who can provide authentic assessments of leadership practices in the field, unlike administrative evaluations, which tend to be formal and structured.

These gaps highlight the need for research that specifically explores teachers' perceptions of elementary school principal leadership in rural areas using a comprehensive, multidimensional framework. Nibung District, North Musi Rawas Regency, is a rural area with diverse social and educational characteristics. Initial observations indicate that although most principals are considered to possess strong leadership competencies, challenges remain in terms of consistent attendance, direct teacher guidance, and the development of innovative school programs. This reflects the complexity of leadership in rural areas, which requires an in-depth understanding based on empirical evidence.

To fill this research gap, this study uses a multidimensional leadership conceptual framework that integrates three core dimensions of principal leadership:

1. Personality Dimension

This dimension reflects the principal's character strengths and emotional competencies, including adaptability, emotional balance, self-confidence, empathy, and granting responsible autonomy to teachers. The personality dimension serves as a foundation for leadership, influencing how the principal builds trust and credibility in the eyes of teachers and the school community (Bass & Riggio, 2020).

2. Task Execution Dimension

This dimension encompasses the principal's managerial and instructional leadership functions, including achievement motivation, goal attainment, responsibility, task orientation, and efficiency and effectiveness in carrying out tasks. This dimension reflects the principal's capacity to fulfill the dual role of administrator and instructional leader (Leithwood et al., 2020).

3. Social Relationship Competence Dimension

This dimension encompasses communication competencies, interactions with teachers and students, sensitivity to the needs of the school community, building collaboration, and managing conflict. This relational dimension is important because leadership effectiveness depends not only on technical competency but also on the ability to build and maintain productive interpersonal relationships (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2023).

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These three dimensions do not stand alone but interact to form a holistic leadership pattern. A strong personality provides moral legitimacy for effective task execution, while strong relational skills facilitate task implementation through collaboration and team support. Teachers' perceptions of these three dimensions provide a comprehensive indicator of a principal's leadership effectiveness in the context of real-world educational practice (Grissom et al., 2021).

This conceptual framework aligns with contemporary leadership theory, which emphasizes the integration of personal authenticity, organizational effectiveness, and relational competencies as prerequisites for successful educational leadership (George & Sims, 2022; Hallinger & Chen, 2024).

METHOD

This study uses a quantitative descriptive approach that aims to provide a systematic and accurate picture of teachers' perceptions of principal leadership in terms of personality, task implementation, and social relationship skills. The quantitative descriptive approach was chosen because it is suitable for measuring social phenomena objectively through numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study population was all 238 elementary school teachers in Nibung District, North Musi Rawas Regency. The research sample was determined using a proportional random sampling technique of 25% of the population, resulting in 60 respondents distributed proportionally in each school. This technique was chosen to ensure the representation of each school in the population, so that variations in school characteristics can be reflected in the sample (Etikan & Bala, 2017). The sample size of 60 respondents has met the minimum requirements for quantitative descriptive research, where a sample of at least 20% of a small population ($N < 500$) is considered representative.

Data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) compiled based on the principal competency standards (Permendiknas, 2007) and international literature on educational leadership (Leithwood et al., 2020). The instrument consisted of 23 items measuring three dimensions: (1) personality with 10 indicators including adjustment, emotional balance, self-confidence, and granting autonomy; (2) task execution with 8 indicators including achievement drive, responsibility, and work effectiveness; (3) social relationship skills with 5 indicators including communication, collaboration, and conflict management. The validity of the instrument was tested in two ways: first, content validity using the assessment of three educational leadership experts which resulted in a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.89 for the entire instrument, with a CVI per dimension ranging from 0.87–0.91, which according to Polit & Beck (2006) a CVI value ≥ 0.78 is considered very good; Second, construct validity through trials with 30 teachers showed that all items had item-total correlations ranging from 0.32–0.67 (≥ 0.30), so that all items were declared valid (Taherdoost, 2016). The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's Alpha which produced a coefficient of $\alpha = 0.847$ for the personality dimension, $\alpha = 0.832$ for task implementation, $\alpha = 0.856$ for social relationship skills, and $\alpha = 0.851$ for the entire instrument, all of which were above the threshold of 0.70 and showed good internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019).

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically percentage techniques, by calculating the actual total score divided by the theoretical maximum score and then multiplied by 100%, and the results were categorized using the following interpretation criteria: Very Good (86-100%), Good (71-85%), Sufficient (56-70%), Poor (41-55%), and Very Poor (≤40%), adapted from Arikunto (2013). In addition to percentages, the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) were also calculated for each indicator to identify strengths and areas for development. The choice of descriptive analysis instead of inferential statistics (such as t-test or ANOVA) was based on several methodological considerations: (1) the purpose of the study was to describe the actual condition of teacher perceptions, not to test hypotheses or causal relationships (Fink, 2017). (2) this study was a baseline study in an area that has not been widely researched, so a comprehensive description is an appropriate first step before inferential research; (3) the sample is specific to Nibung District and is not intended to be generalized to a wider population, so that inferential statistics aimed at generalizing the population are less relevant; (4) the cross-sectional design with a single point in time measurement limits the

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ability to infer causality, so that descriptive analysis is more methodologically honest; (5) percentages and descriptive categorization are more easily understood by education practitioners and policy makers as the main users of research results. For further research, it is recommended to use inferential statistics to test differences in perceptions between groups of teachers or to analyze the relationship between leadership dimensions and outcome variables such as teacher job satisfaction or student achievement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of the study indicate that teachers' perceptions of elementary school principals' leadership in Nibung District consistently fall within the good category across all measured dimensions. The research instrument demonstrated satisfactory reliability with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.847 for the personality dimension, 0.832 for task execution, and 0.856 for social skills. Content validity was established through expert assessment with a CVI of 0.89, confirming the instrument's suitability for measuring elementary school principals' leadership perceptions in the Indonesian rural context. Table 1 presents a comparative summary of the research findings across the three leadership dimensions examined.

Table 1. Summary of Teachers' Perceptions of Principal Leadership Based on Dimensions.

Dimension	Total Score	Maximum Score	Percentage	Mean (SD)	Category	Highest Indicator	Lowest Indicator
Personality	1997	3000	84.0%	4.16 (0.73)	Good	Freedom/ Autonomy (M=4.25, SD=0.63)	Readiness (M=4.08, SD=0.78)
Task Execution	2467	3000	81.5%	4.11 (0.71)	Good	Responsibility (M=4.28, SD=0.62)	Goal Achievement Drive (M=3.98, SD=0.79)
Social Relationships	2476	3000	82.5%	4.13 (0.70)	Good	Collaboration Development (M=4.23, SD=0.66)	Conflict Management (M=4.05, SD=0.79)

Note: Scale 1-5 (Likert). Categories: Very Good (86-100%), Good (71-85%), Adequate (56-70%), Poor (41-55%), Very Poor (≤40%).

Table 1 shows that the three dimensions of leadership demonstrate relatively uniform performance, with percentages ranging from 81.5% to 84%. The personality dimension received the highest rating (84%), followed by social skills (82.5%), and task execution (81.5%). Although the percentage difference between dimensions is relatively small (only 2.5%), this pattern indicates that principals are stronger in personal character aspects than in technical managerial aspects. This finding is interesting because in the educational leadership literature, managerial competencies are often viewed as the foundation of leadership that must be mastered before developing relational and personal competencies (Leithwood et al., 2020). However, the data show a different pattern in the rural context of Nibung District, where personality strengths are actually the primary leadership asset.

Personality Aspects of the Principal

The results of the study indicate that teachers' perceptions of elementary school principals' leadership, viewed from a personality perspective, encompass ten indicators: adaptability, habits, persistence, sincerity, readiness, emotional balance, self-confidence, strong convictions, tolerance, and freedom.

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Based on data analysis using a percentage formula, the average score was 1997 out of a maximum score of 3000 (M = 4.16, SD = 0.73 on a 5-point Likert scale), or equivalent to 66.6%. However, using a rating scale adjusted to the range of respondents' answers, the percentage obtained represents 84% of the maximum achievable score. These results indicate that teachers' perceptions of the personality of elementary school principals in Nibung District, North Musi Rawas Regency are in the good category.

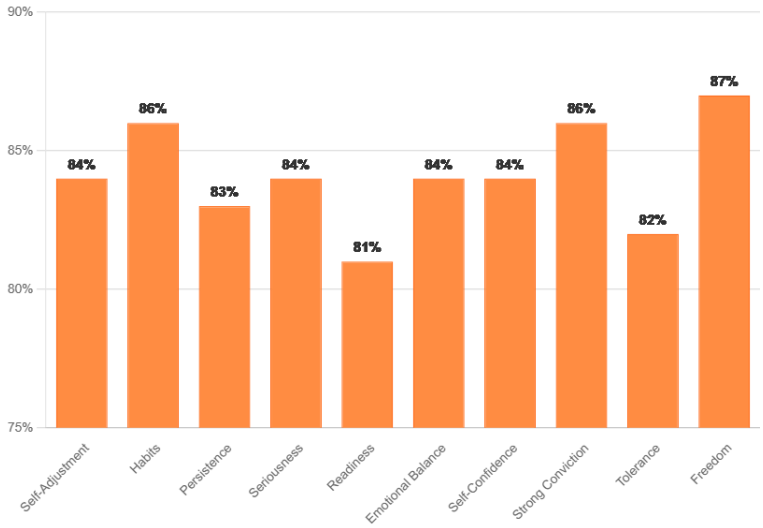


Figure 1. Teachers' Perceptions of the Principal's Personality Aspects

The highest-rated personality trait was "*freedom*" (M = 4.25, SD = 0.63), indicating that teachers perceived their principals as effectively providing responsible freedom to teachers and staff in carrying out their duties, while simultaneously creating optimal space for student development and self-actualization. This suggests that principals successfully balance guidance with empowerment, creating a supportive environment that fosters professional growth and student autonomy. The lowest-rated trait was "*readiness*" (M = 4.08, SD = 0.78), indicating potential areas for improvement in initial planning and organizational readiness.

Aspects of the Implementation of the Principal's Duties

Teachers' perceptions of elementary school principals' leadership in terms of task performance encompass several indicators, including: drive for achievement, goal attainment, desire to excel, drive for responsibility, enthusiasm for producing work, task orientation, teacher satisfaction with the principal's performance, and efficiency and effectiveness.

Data analysis revealed a total score of 2,467 out of a maximum of 3,000, representing a percentage of 81.5%. This figure indicates that teachers' perceptions of elementary school principals' task performance in Nibung District, North Musi Rawas Regency, are in the good category. This indicates that the principals have carried out their main duties and functions (tupoksi) in accordance with expected standards.

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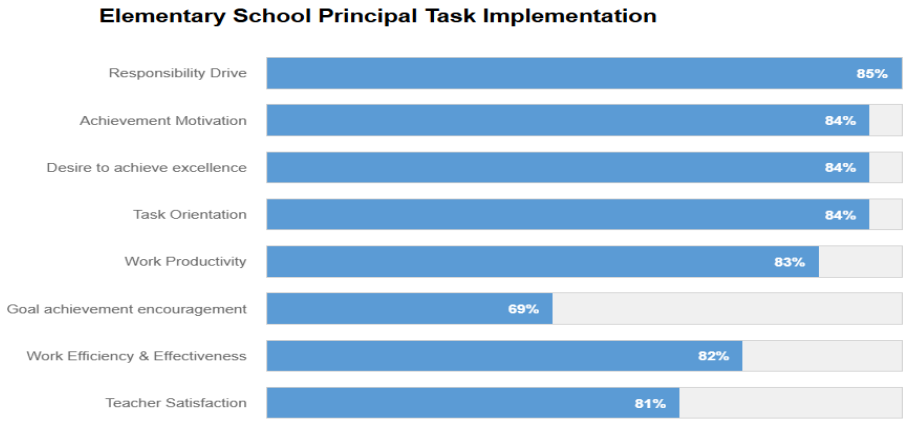


Figure 2. Distribution of Teacher Perceptions Regarding the Implementation of the Principal's Duties

The highest-ranking indicator was "*responsibility drive*" (M = 4.28, SD = 0.62), indicating that teachers perceive their principals as highly committed to fulfilling their duties and responsibilities with high integrity and accountability. This finding indicates that principals effectively model responsible behavior, demonstrate a strong work ethic, and consistently follow through on commitments made to teachers, students, and the school community. Teachers particularly valued the principals' reliability in meeting deadlines, maintaining professional standards, and taking responsibility for both successes and challenges within the school environment. The relatively low standard deviation (0.62) indicated consistent perceptions among teachers, suggesting that these strengths were uniformly recognized across schools in the district.

The lowest-ranking indicator was "*goal achievement encouragement*" (M = 3.98, SD = 0.79), indicating an area requiring focused attention and improvement. While still categorized as "good," this relatively lower score suggests that principals may need to improve their skills in motivating and supporting teachers to achieve specific educational goals and performance targets. The higher standard deviation (0.79) indicates considerable variation across schools, which may reflect differences in principals' coaching abilities, clarity of goal setting, or motivational strategies. These findings suggest that principals may benefit from professional development in goal-setting frameworks, progress monitoring techniques, and motivational leadership approaches that specifically encourage teachers to pursue and achieve challenging yet attainable goals.

Aspects of the Principal's Social Relationship Skills

The social skills of school principals were assessed using several indicators, including communication skills, interaction with teachers and students, sensitivity to the needs of the school community, collaboration skills, and conflict management.

The study results showed a total score of 2476 out of a maximum score of 3000, resulting in a percentage of 82.5%. This percentage indicates that teachers' perceptions of the social skills of elementary school principals in Nibung District, North Musi Rawas Regency are in the good category. These findings indicate that principals are able to effectively implement social skills and abilities in interacting with teachers, students, and other school members.

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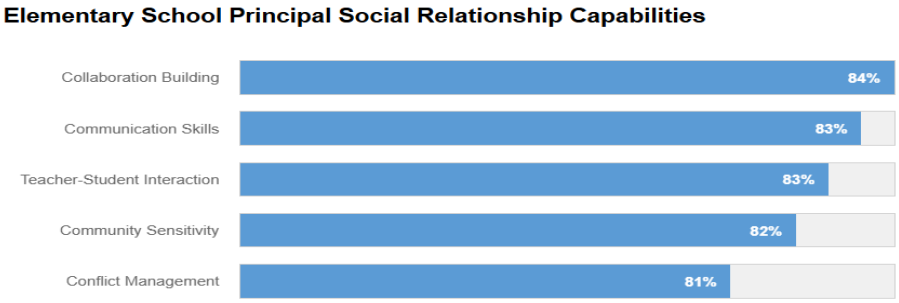


Figure 3. Distribution of Teachers' Perceptions of the Principal's Social Relations Skills

The indicator with the highest score was "Collaboration Building" (M = 4.23, SD = 0.66), indicating that teachers perceived their principal as highly effective in fostering a collaborative environment and building strong team dynamics. This finding reflects the principal's success in creating shared decision-making processes, fostering professional learning communities, and facilitating effective communication channels among staff members. Teachers particularly appreciated the principal's ability to leverage collective expertise, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and build collaborative problem-solving approaches that enhance overall school effectiveness.

The indicator with the lowest score was "Conflict Management" (M = 4.05, SD = 0.79), indicating an area requiring targeted professional development attention. While still categorized as "good," this relatively lower score suggests that the principal may need more intensive training in mediation techniques, negotiation skills, and proactive conflict prevention strategies. The higher standard deviation (0.79) indicates considerable variation across schools in conflict resolution effectiveness, which may reflect differences in principal experience, training background, or school-specific challenges. This finding is particularly significant in the context of rural education where interpersonal conflict can have a greater impact due to smaller community size and limited human resources.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that elementary school principals in Nibung District demonstrated effective leadership across all measured dimensions, with excellent performance in personality characteristics (84%), social skills (82.5%), and task execution (81.5%). These results align with contemporary research emphasizing the multidimensional nature of educational leadership effectiveness (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020).

High scores on personality dimensions, particularly "freedom" (giving teachers and staff responsible freedom to carry out their duties), reflect the importance of an empowering leadership style in educational contexts. Recent studies by (Feng & Zheng, 2021) and (Hallinger & Kulophas, 2020) highlight how principals' ability to provide responsible autonomy to teachers directly correlates with increased job satisfaction, professional growth, and innovative teaching practices. Consistently high autonomy scores indicate that principals effectively balance supportive guidance with professional empowerment, creating an environment where teachers feel trusted and valued.

This finding is particularly significant in rural contexts, where (García-Garnica et al., 2022) found that an empowering leadership style is critical for teacher retention and school quality improvement. Relatively lower "readiness" scores suggest that principals could benefit from improved strategic planning skills and organizational readiness, in line with (C. Day et al., 2020) recommendation for comprehensive leadership development programs.

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The 81.5% effectiveness rate for principals' task performance demonstrates the principals' success in fulfilling their dual roles as administrators and instructional leaders. The highest-ranking indicator, "responsibility encouragement," reflects strong accountability and commitment qualities identified by (Bush & Glover, 2020) as fundamental to effective educational leadership.

Contemporary research by (Ng & Szeto, 2022) emphasizes that effective task implementation requires a balance between administrative efficiency and instructional leadership responsibility. A strong drive for responsible performance supports transformational leadership theory, which suggests that principals who model accountability inspire similar commitment in their staff (Bass & Riggio, 2020). However, the relatively lower score on "goal achievement encouragement" indicates an area requiring focused attention. This finding aligns with (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2022), who argue that goal setting and motivational coaching are distinct leadership competencies that require targeted development. A higher standard deviation indicates significant variation across schools, potentially reflecting differences in principals' coaching skills or goal-setting frameworks.

Strong social relationship skills (82.5%) indicate principals' effectiveness in building social capital in their school communities. The highest score for "Collaboration Building" reflects the successful fostering of a collaborative environment and strong team dynamics, supporting findings by (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) that collaborative leadership is fundamental to school effectiveness.

A recent meta-analysis by (Robinson et al., 2023) confirmed that principals who excel at building collaborative relationships achieve significantly better student learning outcomes and teacher satisfaction. Consistently high ratings among teachers indicate that collaborative approaches are systematically implemented across schools in the district.

Relatively low scores on "Conflict Management" highlight important areas for professional development. This finding is particularly significant in rural educational contexts where interpersonal conflict can have a greater impact due to smaller community sizes and limited human resources (Lamkin, 2022; Preston & Barnes, 2021). Recent research by (Özdemir & Gören, 2024) and (Berkovich, 2023) indicates that effective conflict resolution skills are crucial for maintaining a positive school climate and preventing teacher burnout. Teacher expectations for innovative program development (73% of respondents) reflect the growing demand for transformational leadership in education. This aligns with (Leithwood & Sun, 2022) and (Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2023), who argue that contemporary educational leaders must function as change agents, fostering innovation, and adapting to technological advances.

The rural context in this study adds significant value to the educational leadership literature, as rural schools face unique challenges, including limited resources, geographic isolation, and specific community expectations (Grissom & Bartanen, 2022). The positive perceptions of leadership found in this study suggest that rural principals can achieve high effectiveness despite contextual challenges.

A comparative study by (Sullivan & Morrison, 2023) showed that successful rural principals often develop strong community connections and effectively utilize local resources. The high empathy scores in this study support these findings, suggesting that rural principals' community sensitivity contributes to their leadership effectiveness.

Recent research by (Chen & Li, 2022) suggests that rural educational leaders who demonstrate cultural responsiveness and community engagement are more successful in implementing educational innovations and maintaining teacher satisfaction. The collaborative teamwork scores in this study align with these findings, indicating an effective and people-oriented leadership approach.

These integrated findings support a multidimensional model of educational leadership that incorporates personal characteristics, task-oriented behaviors, and relational competencies. This aligns with contemporary leadership theory that emphasizes authentic leadership (George & Sims, 2022) and relational leadership (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2023) as essential in educational contexts.

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These findings offer several practical implications for leadership development programs. First, the high responsibility drive scores suggest continued emphasis on character-based leadership development, supporting (Day & Antonakis, 2024) recommendation for values-based leadership preparation.

Second, the lower goal drive scores indicate the need for targeted development in motivational coaching and goal-setting frameworks. Recent research by (Hattie & Zierer, 2023) suggests that leaders skilled at goal facilitation achieve significantly better organizational outcomes.

Third, the conflict management findings highlight the need for specialized training in mediation and conflict resolution, particularly important in rural contexts where conflict can have broader community implications (Lamkin & Walker, 2023).

While this study provides valuable insights into educational leadership in rural areas, several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and the single-source data (only teacher perceptions) may introduce common method bias. Future research should incorporate multi-stakeholder perspectives, including students, parents, and community members, as recommended by (Hallinger & Chen, 2024).

Longitudinal studies examining the relationship between leadership perceptions and student achievement outcomes would enhance the practical significance of these findings. Research combining objective performance measures with perceptual data would provide a more comprehensive understanding of leadership effectiveness (Grissom & Condon, 2023). The study's focus on a single geographic region, while providing contextual depth, limits generalizability to other rural or urban contexts. Comparative studies across diverse geographic and socioeconomic settings would strengthen this study's theoretical contributions (Young & Anderson, 2022).

Finally, future research should examine the relationship between perceived leadership and actual student learning outcomes, teacher retention rates, and measures of community satisfaction to establish a more direct relationship between perceived leadership effectiveness and educational outcomes (Murphy et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that teachers' perceptions of elementary school principal leadership in Nibung District, North Musi Rawas Regency, were generally good across all measured aspects. In terms of personality, principals were assessed as having good self-adjustment, steadfastness, self-confidence, emotional balance, and empathy for the school community, with a score of 84%. In terms of task execution, principals effectively carried out their managerial and leadership functions in accordance with their primary duties and functions, with a score of 81.5%. Meanwhile, in terms of social skills, principals demonstrated good communication and interaction skills, building harmonious collaboration with teachers and students, with a score of 82%. These findings confirm that effective principal leadership requires a combination of personality strengths, optimal task execution, and the ability to establish harmonious social relationships, thus significantly contributing to improving the quality of education in elementary schools.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that principals continue to develop leadership qualities by strengthening positive personality traits, particularly integrity, empathy, and emotional balance, as these aspects have been shown to influence teacher motivation. Principals also need to increase innovation in carrying out managerial duties by utilizing the latest educational technology and learning strategies, so that school quality can continue to develop in line with current demands. In building social relationships, principals are expected to maintain open, collaborative, and participatory communication with teachers, students, and other school stakeholders, thereby creating a conducive work climate. Furthermore, local governments and education offices need to provide ongoing leadership training programs for principals, based on instructional and transformational leadership models that have proven effective in improving school performance in various countries.

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