

# Essential Elements of Principal Leadership: A Literature Review of the Leadership Qualities of Primary and Secondary Principals

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**Abstract:** Amidst ongoing educational reform around the world, the leadership qualities of primary and secondary principals have captured the increased interest of researchers. This article aims to explore the essential components of principal leadership by conducting a literature review of relevant research both in China and other countries. The survey finds that despite the variations in the definitions of principal leadership in different regions and at different times, there are still certain shared key elements in them. It summarizes the core qualities of principal leadership at the basic education level in terms of personal traits, the capacity to influence people, and the ability to make sustainable organizational improvements.

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## **Introduction**

**I**N THE CONTEXT of ongoing reform in the education world, the development of basic education has garnered special attention in academia as well as among the general public. Primary and secondary principals, who play a central role in the development of their respective schools, have been required to take on increased responsibilities. Whether they can meet the ever-intensifying challenges is contingent on their leadership qualities (Yan, 2022). Principal leadership is a critical component of school governance, mediating institutional factors, such as the organizational structure, rules and regulations, and resource allocation, as well as cultural factors, such as school culture, values, and teacher-student relationships within the school (Wang, 2015). It can have significant influences on the efficiency of school management, teacher professional development, and student academic achievements (Veleti et al., 2023; Karadağ et al., 2015; He et al., 2024).

The study of principal leadership began in late 20th-century America. In the following decades, researchers have conducted multi-faceted investigations in this area. Walker and Hallinger (2015) synthesized five systematic literature reviews on principal leadership in East Asia and discerned three content patterns via thematic analysis: influences on principalship, principal leadership practices, and principal development. Goldring et al. (2016) conducted a comprehensive review of principal leadership assessment practices in the United States for a thorough understanding of the distinct practices of principal leadership assessment in various states. Arar et al. (2022) systematically surveyed research on Islamic-based educational leadership published between 1990 and 2021 to present the main themes incorporated in these studies and to reveal the developments in research on educational leadership and policy in the Islamic world. In addition to studies examining country- or territory-specific principal leadership, there have also been academic efforts to promote principal leadership research in a certain country by drawing on research results from foreign countries (Zhao & Zhou, 2017; Xu & Zhu, 2019). For example, to provide recommendations on enhancing Chinese principal leadership practices and school governance capability, Yan (2022) surveyed the theoretical constructs, structural models, and research methods in principal leadership studies in Western countries and explored the key elements and application scenarios of excellent principal leadership.

More in-depth research into and extensive practical explorations of principal leadership necessitate a clear definition of its essential components. Particularly, to evaluate the effects of principal leadership on other educational factors, it is necessary to develop appropriate assessment instruments to ensure the reliability and validity of research. Some researchers discovered that the practices of leadership assessment often lacked justification and documentation in terms of the utility, psychometric properties, and accuracy

of the instruments, and that the main difficulty in assessing principal leadership was the identification of the dimensions that needed to be assessed (Goldring et al., 2016). At the same time, principal leadership is highly contextual (Arar et al., 2022), with its development being influenced by multiple factors, such as the social system, policies, and culture (Walker & Hallinger, 2015). As a result, it is challenging to unify the definition of principal leadership dimensions for different regions. Also, due to the continual evolution in the educational landscape and national policies across the years, the connotations of principal leadership are constantly changing. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of various conceptual frameworks or models for principal leadership. Each of them has its own features regarding the definition of dimensions and the model structure. Yet, they are not completely mutually exclusive but instead share some commonalities (Wang, 2015). Therefore, we contend that principal leadership in different contexts may have varied components but is bound to bear some common essential elements that deserve thorough exploration for further advancing the development of basic education.

## **Research Purpose and Questions**

The present study aims to extract essential qualities of principal leadership from the existing body of literature to provide reference for researchers who are working to develop principal leadership assessment tools, for education administrators who are accountable for the planning of principal training and for primary and secondary school leaders who are committed to continuously improving their leadership capacity. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

*RQ 1: What are the justifications for the definition of components of principal leadership by researchers from various regions?*

*RQ 2: What is the evolution trajectory of principal leadership amid the changes in times and education climates?*

*RQ 3: What are the commonalities shared by different studies in their judgment of the core qualities of principal leadership?*

## **Research Methods and Process**

We sourced literature from the Web of Science and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), using “principal leadership,” “educational leadership,” “principal,” “models,” “indications,” and “qualities” as search terms. To ensure the academic quality of the included literature from the

CNKI, only articles published by journals listed in “A Guide to the Core Journals of China” and the “Chinese Social Science Citation Index” were included. All papers are from peer-reviewed journals. In order to retrieve studies of principal leadership from different periods, there were no time limits set for the publications. By the deadline of June 25th, 2024, 271 articles in Chinese and 403 ones in English had been obtained.

After removing duplicate articles, we further excluded those with (1) a focus on non-basic education principal leadership; (2) a lack of clear definition of components of principal leadership; (3) a discussion concentrating on the leadership of ordinary teachers and educational authorities; and (4) full text unavailable. The application of Rayyan was adopted in the screening and analysis of the articles retrieved. After selecting literature that was highly relevant to the topic in discussion, we also adopted the method of snowballing for literature complementation. Finally, 60 articles were included in our literature review, with 27 in Chinese and 33 in English.

## **A Comparison of the Definitions of Principal Leadership by Chinese and Foreign Researchers**

Our review shows that there are differences in the definition of the components of principal leadership between Chinese and foreign researchers. First off, prominent is the influence of Confucianism-dominated traditional Chinese culture and values on Chinese researchers’ conception of principal leadership. For instance, Ai and Zhao (2019) drew on traditional Chinese ideological notions, such as “prioritizing righteousness over personal interests,” “moral integrity,” “serving the public,” and “alignment between knowledge and action,” in constructing a principal leadership model that highlights three major components: value leadership that emphasizes benevolence and righteousness, moral leadership that requires both spiritual and behavioral integrity, and instructional leadership based on personal expertise and aspirations. Zhang (2023), drawing inspiration from the Confucian Analects, argued that principal leadership should incorporate self-development ability, the capacity to guide, and social skills. In the meantime, Chinese researchers are susceptible to the impact of running governmental policy when conceptualizing principal leadership. In response to the new requirements for the teacher’s roles under the “competence-focused education” policy, Li et al. (2012) advanced a teacher development-centered principal leadership style, which prioritizes teacher professional development, pays attention to the teachers’ emotional and attitudinal changes, and seeks a balance between normalizing teachers’ educational behavior and stimulating their motivation for innovation. In addition, it is possible that certain research on principal leadership has been affected by both traditional culture and current education policies. For example, in the context of the Chinese government’s advocacy

of building a high-quality education system, Liu (2023) emphasized the traditional Chinese management concept of “serving as a role model for one’s subordinates” in defining the roles of the school leader, who, in her mind, must act as an excellent example for ordinary teachers and provide professional guidance for them.

More often than not, researchers from outside China choose to justify their definition of the components of principal leadership with a certain leadership theory. For example, the theory of principal instructional leadership is frequently adopted in research on the core qualities of principal leadership (Emmanuel & Valley, 2021). Some researchers proposed evaluating the instructional leadership capability of principals in three dimensions: establishing the school mission, managing teaching plans, and creating a positive learning atmosphere (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Antoniou & Lu, 2018). Others opted to look at principal instructional leadership in five dimensions: developing the school’s education specialties, raising the curriculum and teaching quality, promoting teacher professional development, improving the effects of adaptive learning, and optimizing teaching support (Lai & Lien, 2023; Aldighrir, 2024). Ahmad et al. (2023) added counseling skills to the conventional model of principal instructional leadership, arguing that the principal must have adequate communication skills in addition to educational expertise. Furthermore, other leadership theories, such as transactional leadership and context-based leadership, have also been employed in discussions about the dimensions of principal leadership (Bass et al., 2003; Kutz, 2008; Noman et al., 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019). In addition to the said leadership theories from the education world, some researchers have tried to draw on theories in the domain of business management (Berkovich & Hassan, 2023). For instance, Da’as (2016) discussed principal leadership in the dimensions of interpersonal communication skills, strategic capability, and cognitive ability on the basis of Mumford et al.’s (2007) leadership skills model.

Nevertheless, our review spotted a common research method adopted by domestic and foreign studies on principal leadership qualities: to gather information on distinguished principals through direct or indirect channels and extract valuable leadership skills from their specific practices (Chen & Yang, 2020; Kramer, 2023; Zeinabadi, 2023). Using research results from the International Successful School Principals Program (ISSPP), Hu (2022), a Chinese researcher, summarized key qualities for being a successful principal, such as the capacity to assist school members in reaching an agreed vision, to promote teacher professional development, to build constructive relationships with stakeholders, and to discern the development opportunities for the school. Norman et al. (2016) conducted a case study of a Malaysian school, which reveals that potent interpersonal skills, people-centered leadership, clear communication of visions and goals, focusing on student academ-

ic achievement, co-curricular activities, developing people, and creating a positive work environment are all vital constituents of successful principal leadership.

To sum up, the education policies, national culture, relevant leadership theories, and practical experiences of principals are all possible considerations for the definition of components of principal leadership. Chinese researchers are more likely to establish the dimensions of principal leadership from the standpoints of traditional culture and education policies, while their foreign counterparts show preferences for specific leadership theories as the justifications for their definition of principal leadership. Some studies have also pointed out that the same leadership theory may result in varied definitions of principal leadership dimensions in different countries or territories due to the disparities in the expected roles of the principal in differential places (Zhang, 2013; Zheng et al., 2017). In other words, principal leadership is highly contingent on its specific context.

## **The Evolutionary Trajectory of the Components of Principal Leadership**

Our survey finds that the expected qualities of principal leadership vary as time changes and educational reform advances. In China, the recent socio-economic transformation and education policy shifts find their expression in researchers' varying conceptions of principal leadership. Zhang (2007, 2009) argued that the early constructs of principal leadership typically included three aspects: directing organizational development, improving team efficacy, and building the bi-partite relationship between the principal and staff. In the context of the introduction of the "Double Reduction Policy" in recent years, which emphasizes the reduction of students' academic burden, the bi-partite relationship gives way to a tri-partite one that stresses the importance of the principal's attention to students' competence development in addition to that of the teaching staff and middle-level school cadres (Cheng & Zhang, 2023). Earlier, Shen and Sun (2014) defined principal leadership as the ability to use organizational resources to create an education environment that facilitates professional community-based cooperation, meaningful teacher-student interaction, and improvement of teaching quality, with the ultimate goal of enhancing students' academic achievement. Later, as China's urbanization advanced, Shen (2018) proposed that principal leadership should include situation-adaptive ability in response to the challenges of the expanded school size and teaching force brought on by urbanization. Likewise, Zhao (2009) first introduced into the Chinese education community Sergiovanni's (1984) principal leadership framework, which highlighted five aspects of leadership: technical, human, educational, symbolic, and cultural. When the Chinese government released the national developmental strategy of rural revitaliza-

tion, Yang et al. (2023) worked to adapt this theoretical framework to the actual circumstances of Chinese rural schools by rephrasing the five leadership forces as cultural leadership that integrates leadership into rural cultural revitalization; symbolic leadership that responds to rural revitalization advocacy; educational leadership that demonstrates professional support; human leadership that harnesses home-school co-education resources; and technical leadership that strives for the retention of rural teachers.

As a result of the advances in information technology and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for educational organizations, researchers across the globe have realized the significance of digital leadership and the use of digital technologies for the improvement of school management (Neyişi & SARI, 2023; Gao et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). Berkovich and Hassan (2023) investigated the impact of digital transformational leadership on school management outcomes in Bahraini schools. Deploying digital communication and collaboration tools to support teachers' remote instruction was a paramount indicator of the digital transformation leadership of the principal in their evaluation. According to Zhou et al. (2023), to adapt to the new ecology of smart education built on technologies such as human-machine collaboration, primary and secondary principals must hold a growth mindset and continuously develop crucial capabilities such as intelligent technology literacy, ethical judgment on intelligent education, digital communication, and intelligent education foresight. In addition, some studies have rated agility as an important quality of principal leadership in the new era (Buffone, 2021). In the meantime, new leadership models have been established in reaction to emerging education modalities. For example, Geiger et al. (2023) proposed a principal leadership model for STEM education, which evaluates the principal's leadership in supporting STEM education in multiple dimensions, including interdisciplinary knowledge and practice, STEM intention, the adoption of instruments, and more.

In summary, the new-generation principal leadership exhibits fresh qualities as the result of the incorporation of new factors as well as the modification of prior elements. Also, some decades-old principal leadership models remain in use among current researchers, such as the multifactor leadership model developed by Bass and Avolio (1997), which has implications for the development of principal leadership in the Singaporean educational context (Wang et al., 2023).

## **Essential Qualities of Primary and Secondary Principal Leadership**

Principal leadership is a multifaceted and complicated construct. Some researchers may describe it as the ability to influence (Ying, 2009), a capacity of the principal to motivate school members with their visions and support-

ive behavior and to make best use of resources, laying a solid foundation for further changes (Higgs & Rowland, 2000; Ahmad et al., 2023). Some may argue that principal leadership is an integration process (Rayner, 2009), in which the principal integrates the forces of teachers, students, and other stakeholders (Danišs, 2019). However, the majority of them defined principal leadership as a combination of core abilities a principal must possess to play the role of a school leader (Sun, 2012; Musthan, 2019; Liu, 2023) and to achieve school development goals in collaboration with people under their leadership (Zhang, 2007). In this study, we seek to summarize the essential qualities of principal leadership in the dimensions of personal traits, the capacity to influence people, and the ability to make ongoing organizational improvements on the basis of our analysis of existing literature.

Among the personal traits related to educational leadership, excellent communication skills, agility, and an open mindset are the most crucial for the principal's fulfillment of their leadership roles. First, the importance of effective communication skills for principal leadership has been highly emphasized in existing research (e.g., Dai & Wan, 2011; Xu, 2012; Da'as, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2023). Aside from maintaining effective communication with school members, the principal also has the responsibility to establish smooth communication channels with external individuals or organizations. Inefficient or ineffective communication is detrimental to interpersonal relationships both inside and outside the school (Danišs et al., 2019), which has a negative impact on its management outcomes. Therefore, skillful communication is an integral part of principal leadership. Second, agility (Buffone, 2021) is a relatively newly advanced concept in principal leadership research, encompassing a variety of leadership elements such as insightful evaluation of the time (Cao, 2023), contextual intelligence (Noman et al., 2018; Shen, 2018; Yusof & Ariffin, 2023), and foresight (Dou, 2007; Wang, 2011; Musthan, 2019). Agile school leaders can not only accurately identify the development needs of the school but also successfully perceive the opportunities and challenges brought by shifts in the external educational landscape to the school's development. To be agile, the principal must be alert to imminent changes in education while also being perceptive to the current operational state of the school, including its strengths and weaknesses. Third, having an open mindset ensures that the principal can continuously increase their level of professionalism (Zhang, 2023). A lifelong-learning attitude and awareness of constantly updating educational concepts can help them avoid professional stagnation (Zhang, 2023) and embrace new requirements for principal leadership in the digital era (Cao, 2023).

In the dimension of the capacity to influence people, a successful principal is distinguished by their commitments to improving instructional quality, assisting teacher professional development, and serving as a role model for school members. First off, there is a consensus among researchers

(e.g., Zhang et al., 2014; Antoniou & Lu, 2018; Aldighrir, 2024) that, as a school manager, the principal must focus on improving the quality of teaching and meeting students' diverse needs for learning, since teaching and learning are the two chief activities in a school setting. Second, the principal should also pay attention to the building of a potent teaching force and the professional development of teachers (e.g., Zhang, 2007; Hu, 2022; Zeinabadi, 2023). Recommendations for the principal in this regard include providing ample training opportunities for teachers to increase their professional expertise and competences (e.g. Shen & Sun, 2014; Cheng & Zhang, 2023); setting goals for teacher performance (Leithwood, 2005) and giving them timely feedback and rewards (Dani ěs et al., 2019); striking a balance between regulating educational behavior and motivating instructional innovation in teachers (Li et al., 2012); reaching out with empathy and concern to the staff (Guo, 2022; Kramer, 2023) and guiding them to nurture positive emotions, attitudes, and values for their jobs (Li et al., 2012). Third, researchers agreed that the best way for the principal to influence their staff is to be a good role model for them (Gkolia et al., 2021; Liu, 2023), particularly in professional advancement (Xu, 2012).

Additionally, to advance the overall development of the school, the principal should have the ability to set shared development visions and goals for the school, create positive and inclusive educational atmospheres, and manage the school in collaboration with the staff. First, explicitly defining the development vision and mission of the school on the part of the school leader is generally rated as an effective means for enhancing the school's management efficiency in prior studies (e.g., Ying, 2009; Norman, 2016; Emmanuel & Valle, 2021; Guo, 2022). Second, the principal can unite the staff members to make joint efforts to advance the development of the school by creating a positive and inclusive school climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Yusof & Ariffin, 2023), for which respect for individual differences, trust between school members, and a healthy campus culture are the most vital factors (Leithwood, 2005; Zeinabadi, 2023). Third, teamwork awareness and coordination ability of the principal are regarded as fundamental to ensuring highly efficient school operation and optimal school resource utilization in the literature (Xu, 2012; Cheng & Zhang, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

Based on relevant literature on principal leadership, our survey seeks to identify crucial components of principal leadership at the basic education level while also looking into the variations in its definition between Chinese and overseas researchers. Research results show that these variations are attributable to plural factors, including educational reform, education policy adjustment, and cultural diversity, as well as specific theoretical underpinnings.

We suggest that when looking at different principal leadership theories and models, researchers should focus more on spotting commonalities among them than on judging which of them are superior or inferior.

After analyzing 60 journal articles on principal leadership published globally, we extracted the essential qualities of principal leadership as follows: excellent communication skills, agility, and an open mind set in the dimension of personal character; focusing on the instructional quality, being supportive of teacher professional development, and acting as a role model for school members in the dimension of the capacity to influence people; establishing shared developmental visions for the school; creating a positive and inclusive educational climate; and managing the school in collaboration with the staff in the dimension of driving the ongoing development of the school. These key elements reflect the basic understanding of the roles of primary and secondary principals among global researchers at different times. A thorough discussion of these elements is beneficial for designing legitimate principal training programs, heightening the leadership capacity of primary and secondary principals, and consequently, advancing the development of basic education across the board.

It should be acknowledged that this survey has its limitations. Constrained by the scope of databases used, search keywords, and screening criteria, the review may not be sufficiently exhaustive to cover all significant research on the leadership of basic education school principals. Nonetheless, it can still serve as a steppingstone to further research on the interactions between the said essential leadership qualities and their potential impacts on instruction, as well as future explorations of practical issues such as the development of principal leadership assessment scales and the formulation of principal leadership education and training programs.

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