



A Study on the Leadership of Female Principals at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo in Tulang Bawang, Lampung

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Abstract

This study examines the leadership practices of female principals at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo in Tulang Bawang, Lampung, using a qualitative multiple case study approach grounded in an interpretive paradigm. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis, involving principals, teachers, and administrative staff. The findings reveal that female principals demonstrate relational, participatory, and adaptive leadership characterized by emotional intelligence, collaborative decision-making, and strategic vision. These practices contribute to the development of a supportive school culture and the enhancement of teacher professionalism. Leadership effectiveness is shaped by multiple factors, including personal attributes, organizational culture, teacher motivation, policy frameworks, and technological demands, indicating that leadership is context-dependent and dynamically constructed. The study also identifies key challenges such as administrative workload, gender-based perceptions, resource limitations, and stakeholder pressures, which influence leadership implementation. Despite these constraints, female principals exhibit resilience and adaptability in navigating institutional complexities. This study contributes to the literature on educational leadership by providing empirical insights from vocational school contexts and underscores the importance of institutional support and gender-responsive policies in optimizing leadership effectiveness.

Keywords : *Adaptability, Collaboration, Female Leadership, School Management, Vocational Education.*



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INTRODUCTION

The global discourse on educational leadership has undergone a significant transformation over the past two decades, marked by a growing recognition of diversity, inclusion, and the reconfiguration of traditional leadership paradigms, particularly in relation to gender. Contemporary scholarship increasingly situates female school leadership within broader debates on equity, identity, and institutional effectiveness, emphasizing how women leaders navigate complex socio-cultural and organizational expectations while shaping educational outcomes (Cruz-González et al., 2020; González et al., 2020). This shift is further intensified by global challenges such as digital transformation and post-pandemic educational restructuring, where leadership adaptability becomes central to sustaining school performance and teacher engagement (Alajmi, 2022).

Within this evolving landscape, female principals are no longer examined merely as participants in leadership structures, but as agents who actively reconstruct leadership norms through relational, collaborative, and context-sensitive approaches. A critical synthesis of prior research reveals that female principals often exhibit distinctive leadership characteristics that emphasize empathy, participatory decision-making, and transformational engagement with teachers and school communities (Mert, 2021; Nasikhah et al., 2022). These attributes have been linked to positive organizational climates, including enhanced teacher collaboration and strengthened school culture, as demonstrated in various empirical contexts (Nurvita et al., 2020; Afandi et al., 2023).

Studies on intersectional leadership underscore how female leaders particularly those operating within marginalized or culturally complex settings develop hybrid leadership identities that integrate personal, social, and professional dimensions (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020; Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). Such findings suggest that female leadership cannot be reduced to a singular model but must be

understood as a dynamic interplay between individual agency and structural constraints. Despite these advancements, the existing literature exhibits notable conceptual and empirical limitations that warrant closer scrutiny. A significant proportion of studies remains concentrated in Western or highly urbanized contexts, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings to diverse socio-cultural environments such as rural or semi-urban regions in developing countries. Furthermore, while the notion of leadership identity has been extensively theorized, empirical investigations often fail to capture how this identity is enacted in everyday school practices, particularly within institutional settings characterized by resource constraints and hierarchical governance structures (Cruz-González et al., 2020; Lomotey, 2019).

In addition, the intersection between gender, culture, and leadership effectiveness remains underexplored, with limited attention to how localized norms and expectations shape leadership behaviors and outcomes. The persistence of these gaps highlights the urgency of conducting contextually grounded research that not only examines female leadership practices but also interrogates their implications for educational quality and organizational sustainability. The importance of such inquiry is amplified by evidence linking effective school leadership to critical outcomes such as teacher job satisfaction, reduced occupational stress, and improved working environments (Jentsch et al., 2023). In contexts where educational institutions face multifaceted challenges including limited resources, evolving curricular demands, and socio-cultural constraints understanding the nuanced contributions of female principals becomes essential for informing both policy and practice.

This urgency is not merely academic but extends to the practical necessity of fostering leadership models that are responsive to local realities while aligned with global standards of educational excellence. Positioning this study within the broader scholarly landscape involves a deliberate effort to bridge the gap between global theoretical frameworks and localized empirical realities. While prior research has provided valuable insights into the characteristics and impacts of female leadership, there remains a lack of in-depth, context-specific analyses that explore how such leadership is enacted within Indonesian vocational school settings, particularly in regions like Tulang Bawang, Lampung. By focusing on SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo, this research seeks to contribute to the diversification of leadership studies by incorporating perspectives from underrepresented contexts, thereby enriching the global discourse on educational leadership. This positioning aligns with calls for more inclusive and contextually nuanced research that acknowledges the plurality of leadership experiences across different socio-cultural settings (Dillard, 2021).

This study aims to examine the leadership practices of female principals within the specified institutional contexts, with a particular focus on how leadership is conceptualized, enacted, and experienced by key stakeholders. It seeks to contribute theoretically by refining existing models of female educational leadership through the integration of contextual variables, and methodologically by employing an in-depth, context-sensitive approach that captures the complexity of leadership dynamics in real-world settings. Through this dual contribution, the research aspires to advance a more comprehensive understanding of female school leadership that is both globally informed and locally grounded.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm to capture the complex, context-bound nature of female principals' leadership practices within vocational school settings. A multiple case study approach is adopted, focusing on SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo in Tulang Bawang, Lampung, as bounded systems that allow for an in-depth exploration of leadership phenomena across comparable institutional contexts. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews with female principals, teachers, and selected administrative staff, complemented by non-participant observations and document analysis to ensure methodological triangulation. The sampling strategy is purposive, targeting participants who possess direct experience and insight into leadership practices within the schools, thereby enhancing the richness and relevance of the data. Data analysis follows an iterative thematic procedure involving data condensation, coding, categorization, and the development of interpretive themes that reflect patterns of leadership behavior, relational dynamics, and contextual influences, while maintaining analytic rigor through continuous comparison and reflexivity (Mert, 2021).

To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings, this study applies established qualitative criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, through techniques such as member checking, prolonged engagement, and audit trails. Ethical considerations are rigorously upheld by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, and maintaining sensitivity to power dynamics inherent in school settings. The methodological framework is further informed by intersectional and context-sensitive perspectives, enabling a nuanced understanding of how gender, institutional culture, and socio-cultural factors intersect in shaping leadership practices. By integrating multiple data sources and analytical lenses, the study not only enhances the robustness of its findings but also contributes to methodological advancements in the study of educational leadership in underrepresented contexts (Jentsch et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Leadership Characteristics and Practices of Female Principals

The empirical findings indicate that female principals at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo demonstrate a leadership orientation characterized by relational sensitivity, participatory engagement, and adaptive decision-making grounded in contextual awareness. Interview data reveal that leadership practices are not merely administrative but involve continuous negotiation of interpersonal dynamics with teachers and staff. Such patterns reflect a tendency toward transformational and collaborative leadership behaviors that prioritize trust-building and shared responsibility. This aligns with prior findings suggesting that female school leaders often emphasize relational leadership as a strategic resource in educational settings (Rohmatika, 2023). Further analysis of observational data suggests that both principals consistently employ communicative leadership strategies that foster openness and mutual respect within the school environment. Teachers reported that decision-making processes often involve consultation, which contributes to a sense of ownership among staff members.

This participatory approach appears to enhance organizational cohesion while mitigating hierarchical rigidity commonly observed in traditional school leadership structures. Similar dynamics have been identified in studies emphasizing the role of inclusive leadership in improving institutional effectiveness (Azizah & Mustari, 2024). The thematic coding process highlights that emotional intelligence plays a central role in shaping leadership practices in both cases. The principals demonstrate an ability to manage conflict constructively while maintaining professional relationships across diverse stakeholder groups. This capacity is reflected in the ways they respond to teacher concerns and institutional challenges with empathy and strategic judgment. Empirical evidence suggests that such emotional competencies are integral to effective female leadership in educational institutions (Manalu et al., 2025). Data from interviews also indicate that leadership practices are closely linked to efforts aimed at improving teacher performance and professional development. Both principals actively encourage participation in training programs and foster a culture of continuous learning within their schools. This orientation toward capacity-building reflects a broader commitment to institutional quality enhancement. Comparable findings have been documented in studies examining leadership-driven teacher development initiatives (Rahayu et al., 2023).

The integration of leadership practices with school culture emerges as a significant theme in the analysis. Observational data suggest that both principals actively shape school norms through consistent modeling of discipline, professionalism, and ethical behavior. Teachers perceive these practices as influential in reinforcing positive work attitudes and organizational values. This finding resonates with research highlighting the role of leadership in cultivating supportive and productive school cultures (Izzah et al., 2023). A comparative synthesis between the two schools reveals subtle variations in leadership emphasis, particularly in the degree of formality and delegation. At SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama, leadership appears slightly more structured, with clearly defined roles and procedures guiding organizational activities. In contrast, SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo exhibits a more flexible approach, allowing greater autonomy among teachers in implementing instructional strategies. These variations suggest that leadership practices are shaped by institutional context and organizational history (Widhiyanto & Hasanah, 2024). The following table summarizes key dimensions of leadership practices identified across both cases, illustrating patterns derived from interview and observational data.

Tabel 1. Comparative Dimensions of Female Principals' Leadership Practices at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo

Leadership Dimension	Penawar Tama	Banjar Margo
Participatory Decision-Making	High	Very High
Emotional Intelligence	High	High
Professional Development Focus	Moderate	High
Organizational Structure	Structured	Flexible

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that while both principals exhibit strong participatory tendencies, differences emerge in the emphasis placed on professional development and organizational flexibility. These distinctions reflect context-specific adaptations rather than fundamental divergences in leadership philosophy. The interpretation of these findings suggests that effective leadership is contingent upon aligning strategies with institutional needs and resources. Similar patterns have been observed in studies examining contextual influences on school leadership effectiveness (Jamil et al., 2024). Another significant finding concerns the integration of digital leadership practices, particularly in response to evolving educational demands.

Although not uniformly implemented, both principals demonstrate awareness of the importance of technology in supporting instructional processes. Teachers reported varying degrees of encouragement in integrating digital tools into classroom practices. This reflects emerging trends in digital transformational leadership within educational contexts (Berkovich & Hassan, 2024). Leadership practices during periods of uncertainty, such as post-pandemic recovery, reveal adaptive and resilient characteristics. The principals employ flexible strategies to address shifting educational priorities while maintaining institutional stability. This adaptability is evident in their ability to balance administrative responsibilities with pedagogical leadership. Research on crisis-responsive leadership underscores the importance of such adaptability in sustaining school performance (Baroudi, 2026).

The analysis also indicates that leadership practices are influenced by gendered expectations and socio-cultural norms within the local context. Female principals navigate these expectations by combining assertiveness with relational approaches, thereby establishing legitimacy and authority. This dual strategy enables them to maintain professional credibility while fostering inclusive environments. Empirical studies have highlighted the intersection of gender and leadership in shaping school governance dynamics (Mulawarman & Srihandari, 2021). The findings suggest that leadership characteristics observed in both cases align with a broader conceptualization of visionary and transformative leadership. The principals articulate clear institutional goals while mobilizing teachers toward collective achievement. Their leadership practices reflect a balance between strategic direction and collaborative engagement. Such characteristics are consistent with research emphasizing visionary leadership as a driver of educational improvement (Sunardi et al., 2025).

Factors Influencing the Leadership of Female Principals

The findings reveal that leadership practices of female principals in both schools are shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external factors that extend beyond individual leadership capacity. Internal factors include personal leadership values, professional experience, and emotional resilience, which collectively influence decision-making patterns and interpersonal engagement. Interview data indicate that both principals rely heavily on reflective practices to navigate institutional challenges and maintain leadership effectiveness. Such findings correspond with studies emphasizing the role of personal and psychological attributes in shaping leadership behavior (Rohmatika, 2023). Institutional context emerges as a significant determinant influencing leadership dynamics, particularly in terms of organizational culture and structural conditions.

Teachers reported that supportive school climates facilitate more collaborative and innovative leadership practices, while rigid bureaucratic structures tend to constrain flexibility. Observational data further suggest that institutional norms affect how authority is exercised and negotiated within the school environment. These patterns align with research highlighting the influence of organizational context on leadership styles in educational settings (Widhianto & Hasanah, 2024). Another influential

factor identified in the analysis is teacher-related dynamics, including motivation, competence, and responsiveness to leadership initiatives.

The principals' ability to adapt their leadership approaches appears closely linked to the varying levels of teacher engagement within each school. In contexts where teachers demonstrate high intrinsic motivation, leadership tends to shift toward facilitative and empowering strategies. Empirical evidence supports the notion that teacher characteristics significantly shape leadership effectiveness (Maheshwari, 2022). Socio-cultural expectations surrounding gender also play a critical role in influencing leadership practices. Both principals navigate implicit biases and cultural norms that shape perceptions of female authority in leadership positions. Interview responses suggest that these dynamics require strategic adaptation, particularly in balancing assertiveness with relational sensitivity. Similar findings have been documented in studies examining gendered leadership challenges in educational institutions (Mulawarman & Srihandari, 2021).

Technological and digital factors also emerge as increasingly relevant in shaping leadership practices. The integration of digital tools in school management and instruction requires principals to develop new competencies and adapt leadership strategies accordingly. Data indicate that varying levels of digital literacy among teachers influence how effectively such initiatives are implemented. This observation is consistent with research on digital leadership and its impact on educational environments (Berkovich & Hassan, 2024). External policy environments and educational regulations further contribute to shaping leadership practices in both schools. The principals operate within frameworks defined by national and regional education policies, which influence administrative priorities and decision-making processes. Interview data reveal that compliance requirements sometimes limit innovation while simultaneously providing structural guidance. This dual effect reflects broader discussions on policy constraints in school leadership (Dian Rostikawati, 2022). The following table summarizes key factors influencing leadership practices across both research sites, based on thematic analysis of qualitative data.

Tabel 2. Key Factors Influencing the Leadership of Female Principals in Vocational School Contexts

Influencing Factor	Penawar Tama	Banjar Margo
Personal Leadership Traits	Strong	Strong
Organizational Culture	Moderate	Strong
Teacher Motivation	Variable	High
Digital Competence	Moderate	Moderate
Policy Environment	Influential	Influential

The data in Table 2 indicate that while personal leadership traits remain consistently strong across both cases, variations appear in organizational culture and teacher motivation. These differences highlight the importance of contextual sensitivity in leadership practices. The analysis suggests that leadership effectiveness is not solely determined by individual capability but is also contingent upon environmental conditions. Similar conclusions have been drawn in studies focusing on contextual determinants of leadership performance (Jamil et al., 2024). Crisis-related experiences, particularly those linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, also influence leadership approaches in both schools. The principals demonstrated adaptive strategies in maintaining instructional continuity and organizational stability during periods of disruption. Teachers noted that leadership responsiveness during crises contributed to sustained trust and institutional resilience. This finding aligns with research emphasizing the importance of adaptive leadership in times of uncertainty (Ishak et al., 2022).

Collaboration and stakeholder engagement further emerge as critical influencing factors in leadership effectiveness. Both principals actively involve teachers, staff, and in some cases parents, in decision-making processes. This inclusive approach fosters a sense of shared responsibility and strengthens institutional cohesion. Empirical studies have highlighted the role of collaborative leadership in enhancing school performance and participation (Azizah & Mustari, 2024). Finally, the analysis indicates that visionary orientation and long-term strategic thinking significantly influence leadership practices. The principals demonstrate an ability to align short-term actions with broader institutional goals, thereby ensuring sustainability in school development. This forward-looking

perspective is particularly evident in efforts to improve teacher professionalism and student outcomes. Research on visionary leadership underscores its importance in driving organizational transformation in educational contexts (Sunardi et al., 2025).

Challenges and Constraints in the Leadership of Female Principals

The empirical findings indicate that female principals in both SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo encounter multidimensional challenges that stem from structural, cultural, and interpersonal constraints. Interview data reveal that administrative workload constitutes a persistent obstacle, limiting the principals' capacity to focus on instructional leadership and long-term strategic planning. This burden is intensified by the expectation to simultaneously manage operational, managerial, and relational responsibilities within the school environment. Such findings reflect broader patterns identified in educational leadership studies, where administrative overload constrains leadership effectiveness (Dian Rostikawati, 2022).

Another significant challenge arises from the persistence of gender-based perceptions that subtly influence leadership legitimacy. Although both principals are formally recognized as institutional leaders, interview responses suggest that implicit biases occasionally shape teacher and community expectations. These perceptions require female principals to exert additional effort to establish authority and credibility within the organizational structure. Empirical research has consistently highlighted the impact of gender norms on leadership experiences in educational contexts (Mulawarman & Srihandari, 2021).

The data also reveal that variability in teacher commitment and professional readiness poses a considerable challenge to leadership implementation. Some teachers demonstrate resistance to change, particularly in adopting new pedagogical approaches or participating in professional development programs. This resistance necessitates adaptive leadership strategies that balance encouragement with accountability mechanisms. Similar findings have been reported in studies examining the relationship between teacher engagement and leadership effectiveness (Maheshwari, 2022). Resource limitations further constrain leadership practices in both schools, particularly in relation to infrastructure and access to educational technology.

Observational data indicate that uneven distribution of resources affects the implementation of innovative teaching strategies and digital integration. These limitations require principals to prioritize resource allocation carefully while maintaining educational quality. Research on school leadership emphasizes the critical role of resource availability in shaping institutional performance (Rahayu et al., 2023). In addition, the complexity of managing diverse stakeholder expectations emerges as a recurring challenge in the data. Female principals must navigate the interests of teachers, students, parents, and educational authorities, often under conditions of limited autonomy. This multiplicity of expectations creates tensions that require careful negotiation and strategic communication. Such dynamics are consistent with findings on the relational demands of school leadership (Manalu et al., 2025). The following table presents a synthesis of key challenges identified across both schools, based on thematic analysis of interview and observational data.

Tabel 3. Major Challenges and Constraints in the Leadership Practices of Female School Principals

Challenge Dimension	Penawar Tama	Banjar Margo
Administrative Workload	High	High
Gender Bias	Moderate	Moderate
Teacher Resistance	Moderate	Low
Resource Limitations	Moderate	Moderate
Stakeholder Pressure	High	High

The data in Table 3 illustrate that administrative workload and stakeholder pressure are dominant challenges across both cases, while variations appear in teacher resistance. These patterns suggest that while certain constraints are systemic, others are context-specific and influenced by institutional culture. The interpretation of these findings underscores the importance of situational leadership in addressing diverse challenges. Comparable observations have been made in studies examining contextual

variability in school leadership constraints (Widhianto & Hasanah, 2024). Challenges related to digital transformation also emerge as a significant constraint, particularly in the context of post-pandemic educational recovery. Both principals face difficulties in ensuring consistent integration of technology due to disparities in teacher digital competence and infrastructure readiness. This situation requires continuous support and capacity-building initiatives to enhance digital literacy among staff. Research on digital leadership highlights the necessity of sustained institutional support for effective technology integration (Berkovich & Hassan, 2024).

Leadership during crisis situations reveals additional layers of complexity that extend beyond routine administrative challenges. The principals must respond rapidly to changing circumstances while maintaining organizational stability and educational continuity. Interview data suggest that such conditions demand high levels of adaptability and emotional resilience. Studies on crisis leadership emphasize the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in sustaining institutional performance (Baroudi, 2026). Interpersonal challenges, particularly those related to conflict management, also play a critical role in shaping leadership experiences. The principals frequently mediate disagreements among staff members while maintaining a constructive organizational climate. This process requires balancing firmness with empathy to ensure that conflicts do not disrupt institutional functioning. Empirical evidence supports the view that conflict management is a central component of effective school leadership (Jamil et al., 2024).

The findings indicate that despite these challenges, female principals demonstrate resilience and strategic adaptability in navigating constraints. Their ability to transform challenges into opportunities for institutional learning reflects a dynamic approach to leadership. This adaptability is evident in the continuous refinement of leadership strategies in response to evolving conditions. Research on female educational leadership underscores resilience as a defining characteristic in overcoming structural and cultural barriers (Rohmatika, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the leadership of female principals at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo is characterized by a relational, participatory, and adaptive orientation that reflects transformational leadership practices within context-specific conditions. The principals demonstrate strong emotional intelligence, collaborative decision-making, and strategic vision in fostering a supportive school climate and enhancing teacher professionalism. Leadership effectiveness is shaped not only by individual competencies but also by interacting factors such as organizational culture, teacher motivation, policy frameworks, and technological demands. These dynamics reveal that leadership practices are constructed through continuous negotiation between internal capacities and external institutional environments, requiring flexibility and contextual sensitivity.

The study identifies several structural and cultural challenges, including administrative workload, gender-based perceptions, resource limitations, and stakeholder pressures, which influence the execution of leadership roles. Despite these constraints, the principals exhibit resilience and adaptive strategies that enable them to sustain institutional performance and promote organizational development. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on female educational leadership by providing empirical insights from vocational school contexts while reinforcing the relevance of transformational and collaborative leadership frameworks. These results highlight the importance of strengthening institutional support systems and developing gender-responsive leadership policies to optimize the effectiveness of female principals in diverse educational settings.

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