Leadership Practices of Exemplary Principals in Malaysian Secondary Schools: Evidence from Pahang State

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ABSTRACT

School leadership is widely recognized as the most significant school-level organizational factor after classroom teaching in influencing student learning. Aligned with the aspirations of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, this study evaluates exemplary principal leadership practices using the Successful School Leadership (SSL) framework and examines the reliability of the Successful School Leadership Survey (SSLS) in the context of Pahang state secondary schools. This quantitative survey involved three national secondary schools selected through purposive sampling based on exemplary principal criteria, including recent excellence awards, consistent top-quartile academic performance, and State Education Department recommendations. Respondents comprised 152 teachers (98.1% response rate) from two urban schools and one rural school. The teacher version of SSLS (22 items across four domains: Setting Directions, Building Relationships and Developing People, (Re)Designing the Organization, and Improving the Instructional Program) was administered using a five-point Likert scale. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, *Cronbach's alpha*, one-way ANOVA with Games-Howell post hoc comparisons, and independent samples t-tests (Welch), with Cohen's d effect sizes reported. Findings indicated that exemplary principal leadership practices were rated highly ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.56$), with Setting Directions recording the highest mean ($M = 4.46$). The SSLS demonstrated excellent internal consistency (overall $\alpha = .977$; domain $\alpha = .904$-$.943$). Comparative analyses revealed significant differences across schools (all $p < .001$), with rural schools reporting higher scores than urban schools across all domains with large effect sizes ($d = 0.70$–0.86). These findings provide strong reliability evidence supporting the use of SSLS in the Malaysian context and offer practical implications for leadership development and benchmarking exemplary leadership practices across diverse school contexts. However, findings should be interpreted within the context of three purposively selected schools and require replication using larger and more diverse samples.

Keywords: Successful School Leadership; SSLS; exemplary principals; school leadership; secondary schools; urban–rural; Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

School leadership is recognized as a primary determinant of educational organizational effectiveness, with meta-analytic evidence showing that principal leadership is the second most important factor influencing student learning after classroom teaching (Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2008). In the Malaysian context, secondary school principals play critical roles in ensuring curriculum policy implementation, developing teacher capacity, and building high-achievement climates aligned with the Malaysian Education Blueprint (PPPM) 2013-2025 aspirations (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

The concept of exemplary principals refers to school leaders who not only meet established performance standards but also demonstrate consistent, innovative leadership practices with measurable positive impacts on school communities and student outcomes, serving as models worthy of emulation by other educational leaders (Emmanuel & Valley, 2022). In Malaysia, exemplary principals are specifically identified through formal recognition systems including the *Time-Based Excellence System (TBBK)* established by the Ministry of

Education (MOE) and implemented by State Education Departments. These principals lead schools that achieve "Excellent Status" based on the *Malaysian Education Quality Standards (SKPM)* with 85% or higher achievement without academic decline (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2024).

Recent studies by Abdul Ghani et al. (2022) demonstrate that exemplary principals in Malaysia show more focused instructional leadership practices and stronger commitment to teacher development compared to typical principals. However, these studies used different instruments and did not comprehensively measure exemplary principal leadership constructs using established international theoretical frameworks. Empirical research that systematically measures exemplary principal leadership practices in Malaysia using psychometrically sound, validated instruments remains limited, particularly for urban–rural context comparisons which are increasingly important in addressing Malaysia's geographical diversity and educational equity goals.

The Successful School Leadership (SSL) framework developed by Kenneth Leithwood and colleagues represents one of the most widely referenced and empirically validated school leadership models in the international literature (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Leithwood, 2012). The framework was developed and refined over more than two decades based on research synthesis, large-scale mixed-methods studies, and evaluation of leadership development programs across multiple countries (Leithwood et al., 2017; Leithwood, 2019). SSL contains four main domains of leadership practices proven to contribute to school success across diverse cultural and organizational contexts: Setting Directions, Building Relationships and Developing People, (Re)Designing the Organization, and Improving the Instructional Program (Leithwood et al., 2023).

The Successful School Leadership Survey (SSLS) was specifically developed to measure these four domains through 22 psychometrically validated items (Leithwood et al., 2023). Recent comprehensive psychometric studies involving 1,401 teachers in 81 elementary schools in Texas showed very high internal consistency reliability (overall $\alpha = .99$; domain $\alpha = .91–.94$), robust four-domain factor structure through second-order confirmatory factor analysis with excellent model fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 1.85$, RMSEA = .03, GFI = .99), and measurement invariance across gender, teaching experience, and teacher qualification levels using Rasch Many-Facet analysis (Leithwood et al., 2023).

Despite the widespread use of SSL concepts in Malaysian educational leadership discourse, empirical application of SSLS remains notably limited in published research. This represents a significant gap given that Malaysian leadership standards and frameworks such as the *Standard Kualiti Pendidikan Malaysia (SKPM) Kualiti@Sekolah (SK@S)* and the *Standard Kompetensi Kepengetuaan Sekolah Malaysia (SKKSM)* emphasize similar elements to those in the SSL framework, suggesting theoretical alignment but lacking empirical validation (Bush, 2021). Despite conceptual alignment between SSL and Malaysian leadership standards, empirical validation of SSLS in Malaysian secondary school contexts remains scarce, particularly among formally recognized exemplary principals.

This study addresses this gap with four specific aims: (1) to identify the level of exemplary principal leadership practices in Pahang state secondary schools based on the four SSLS domains; (2) to evaluate the internal consistency reliability of SSLS when used among Pahang state secondary school teachers, providing evidence for its suitability in the Malaysian context; (3) to compare teacher perceptions of exemplary principal leadership practices across three different schools with varying characteristics; and (4) to identify differences in teacher perceptions between urban and rural secondary school contexts, which has important implications for equitable leadership development policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive empirical research across multiple countries has established that school leadership is the second most important factor influencing student learning after classroom teaching quality (Leithwood et al., 2020). A landmark meta-analysis by Robinson et al. (2008) examined 27 studies and found that leadership focused on teaching and learning (instructional leadership) had three to five times greater effects on student achievement compared to transformational leadership alone, with effect sizes of $d = 0.42$ versus $d = 0.11$ respectively. However, Leithwood and Sun (2018) argue compellingly that the most effective leadership integrates transformational and instructional elements in balanced ways, creating what scholars' term 'integrated leadership' (Hallinger, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003).

The Four Paths Model proposed by Leithwood et al. (2020) provides a comprehensive theoretical framework showing how school leadership influences student achievement through four main pathways operating simultaneously: the Rational Path (academic press, disciplinary climate, instructional time use),Emotional Path (teacher commitment, interpersonal trust, collective efficacy),Organizational Path (safe and orderly environment, instructional time planning, collaborative cultures and structures),and Family Path (parent expectations, communication forms, family social and intellectual capital). Structural equation modelling using data from 81 schools in Texas revealed that the Rational Path had the most direct and strongest effect on student learning ($\beta = .42$, $p < .05$), while other paths contributed indirectly through their influence on the Rational Path. Importantly, the leadership domains most strongly influencing the Rational Path were Improving the Instructional Program ($\beta = .98$, $p < .05$) and Setting Directions ($\beta = .37$, $p < .05$), highlighting their critical importance for student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020).

The SSL framework has been widely used as the conceptual foundation for school leadership research in over 20 countries through the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) initiated in 2001 (Gurr & Moyi, 2022). Studies within ISSPP consistently demonstrate that although cultural contexts, policy environments, and educational systems differ substantially, the four core leadership practice domains in the SSL framework remain relevant and can be effectively adapted to local needs and circumstances (Gurr et al., 2018). This finding suggests the existence of core universal leadership practices alongside context-specific adaptations.

Research specifically examining exemplary principals has identified consistent characteristics across cultural contexts. Emmanuel and Valley (2022) conducted qualitative case study research on exemplary principal leadership in the U.S. Virgin Islands using Kouzes and Posner's Five Practices framework and found that exemplary principals consistently demonstrated modelling the way, inspiring shared vision, challenging processes, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. These practices align closely with the SSL framework's emphasis on direction-setting, people development and organizational redesign.

The SSLS was developed through a rigorous, multi-phase process involving extensive theory synthesis, empirical review of existing leadership research, and iterative refinement based on field use in leadership development programs over more than a decade (Leithwood, 2019). Each of the 22 items in SSLS corresponds to one specific leadership practice that has been identified through systematic research as contributing meaningfully to school success. Recent psychometric validation studies by Leithwood et al. (2023) employed sophisticated analytical approaches including: (a) Rasch Many-Facet analysis to test measurement invariance across respondent characteristics and to examine item functioning; (b) second-order confirmatory factor analysis to validate the theoretical structure whereby 22 practices cluster into four domains, which in turn load onto a higher-order leadership factor; and (c) structural equation modelling to test predictive validity by examining relationships between SSLS scores and student achievement through mediating pathways.

In Malaysia, although SSL frameworks and concepts are frequently referenced as theoretical bases in academic discussions about school leadership policy and practice (Bush, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2008), actual use of the SSLS instrument in empirical research remains very limited in published literature. Most Malaysian school leadership studies employ alternative instruments such as the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) developed by Hallinger, or locally developed scales created specifically for Malaysian contexts. This represents a limitation for international comparative research and constrains opportunities to benchmark Malaysian principals against validated international standards. Comparative research examining urban and rural schools' reveals that rural school principals face unique challenges including teacher retention difficulties, limited access to physical and technological resources, geographical isolation, greater geographical distance from professional development opportunities, and different patterns of parent and community involvement (Bush, 2021; Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017). However, systematic comparative studies of leadership practices across urban and rural contexts using validated instruments remain scarce in the Malaysian literature, despite the importance of this question for equitable policy development and resource allocation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sample

This study employed a quantitative descriptive and comparative survey design to examine exemplary principal leadership practices from teacher perspectives. Three secondary schools in Pahang state were selected through

purposive sampling based on clearly defined exemplary principal criteria: (a) recipients of district or state-level excellence awards for principals within the past three years (2021–2024); (b) consistent academic performance with national standardised examination results-specifically the Malaysia Certificate of Education (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia, SPM), the national upper secondary examination, and the Form 3 Assessment (Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3, PT3), a lower secondary standardized assessment, and (c) formal recommendations from the Pahang State Education Department based on documented performance records and leadership contributions. Purposive sampling was appropriate given the study's focus on information-rich cases of recognized exemplary principals (Patton, 2015).

The three participating schools were: School A (urban, *n* = 48 teachers), School B (urban, *n* = 55 teachers), and School C (rural, *n* = 49 teachers). School A is in the Kuantan city centre with approximately 800 students from predominantly middle to upper-income families. School B is also in Kuantan city in Pahang state with approximately 700 students in a residential school setting with selective admission. School C is in a rural district approximately 80 kilometres from the state capital with approximately 500 students, predominantly from lower to middle-income families engaged in agriculture and small businesses. A total of 152 complete questionnaire forms were received from an initial distribution of 155, yielding an excellent response rate of 98.1%.

Instrumentation

The study employed the teacher version of the Successful School Leadership Survey (SSLS) developed by Leithwood and colleagues (Leithwood et al., 2023). SSLS contains 22 items distributed across four domains: Setting Directions (4 items; e.g., "Give staff a sense of overall purpose", "Demonstrate high expectations for your work with students"); Building Relationships and Developing People (6 items; e.g., "Give you individual support to help you improve your teaching practices", "Model a high level of professional practice"); (Re)Designing the Organization (5 items; e.g., "Develop an atmosphere of caring and trust among staff", "Engage parents in the school's improvement efforts"); and Improving the Instructional Program (7 items; e.g., "Help improve instructional programs based on student data" and "Regularly observe classroom activities").

Respondents rated their agreement with each statement using a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. Instructions asked teachers to rate "the extent to which you agree that most leaders in your school, as a group, do the following", referring specifically to the exemplary principal and other school leaders such as senior teachers and department heads. Although the instrument refers to school leaders collectively, leadership practices in Malaysian secondary schools are typically principal-directed. As such, teacher responses were interpreted as reflecting the leadership practices of the exemplary principal who serves as the primary instructional and organizational leader within the school leadership structure.

Translation and Adaptation

The SSLS was translated into Malay language using rigorous forward-backward translation procedures following international guidelines (Beaton et al., 2000). Two independent education leadership experts fluent in both English and Malay language performed initial forward translations. A consensus panel including both translators and the researcher synthesized these into a single version, resolving discrepancies through discussion. An independent professional translator with no prior exposure to the original English version performed back-translation. The research team compared the back-translated version with the original to verify semantic equivalence, making minor adjustments where necessary. No items were removed or modified structurally following translation, preserving the original four-domain structure.

Content validity was established through review by three Malaysian education leadership experts from public universities who evaluated translation accuracy, item appropriateness for Malaysian school contexts, and language clarity. A pilot test with 30 teachers from one secondary school (excluded from the main study) was conducted to assess comprehension, completion time (average 12 minutes), and preliminary reliability (pilot test Cronbach's α = .94).

Data Collection Procedures and Ethical Considerations

Formal permission for data collection was obtained from the Pahang State Education Department and from principals of all three participating schools. Ethical approval was secured from the MOE Educational Planning

and Policy Research Division prior to data collection. Data were collected electronically using Google Forms over a two-week period in October 2024. The questionnaire link was distributed by principals through official school email and internal communication applications. The researcher was not physically present at schools during data collection to minimize response bias and ensure teachers felt free to provide honest assessments.

All participants received comprehensive information about the study through an electronic informed consent form, which clearly stated: (a) participation was entirely voluntary with no consequences for declining or withdrawing; (b) data would be used solely for academic research purposes; (c) no personally identifiable information would be collected; (d) results would be reported only in aggregate at the school level; (e) confidentiality would be strictly maintained; and (f) participants could skip any questions they were uncomfortable answering. Electronic consent was required before accessing the survey questions.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0. The analytical strategy included: (i) Descriptive statistics: means and standard deviations were calculated for each domain and the overall SSLS score. Level interpretation followed established guidelines: 1.00–2.33 (low), 2.34–3.67 (moderate), 3.68–5.00 (high) (Pallant, 2020). (ii) Internal consistency reliability: Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for the overall SSLS scale and each domain separately. Values of $\alpha \geq .70$ indicate acceptable reliability, $\alpha \geq .80$ indicate good reliability, and $\alpha \geq .90$ indicate excellent reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Normality was assessed through skewness and kurtosis values, which fell within acceptable ranges (±2), supporting the use of parametric tests. (iii) One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA): used to test for significant differences in teacher perceptions across the three schools. Levene's test assessed homogeneity of variance assumptions. Given that variances were non-homogeneous (all Levene $p < .05$), Welch's robust F-statistic was reported and Games-Howell post-hoc tests were employed to identify specific between-school differences while controlling family-wise error rate. (iv) Independent samples t-test: used to compare urban schools (School A and School B combined, $n = 103$) versus rural school (School C, $n = 49$). Given non-homogeneous variances (Levene $p < .05$), Welch's t-test with adjusted degrees of freedom was reported. Cohen's d effect sizes were calculated with interpretation guidelines: $d = 0.20$ (small), $d = 0.50$ (medium), $d = 0.80$ (large) (Cohen, 1988). Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all tests. Effect sizes were reported alongside significance tests to provide information about practical significance in addition to statistical significance.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency Reliability

Overall, exemplary principal leadership practices were rated at high levels by teachers ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.56$). Among the four domains, Setting Directions recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.59$), followed closely by (Re)Designing the Organization ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.55$), Building Relationships and Developing People ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.60$), and Improving the Instructional Program which, while still at high levels, recorded the lowest mean ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.60$).

SSLS demonstrated excellent internal consistency reliability with an overall *Cronbach's alpha* of .977, substantially exceeding conventional standards for research instruments. Domain-level reliability coefficients ranged from .904 to .943, all within the excellent range ($\alpha \geq .90$). These values are consistent with findings from the original psychometric validation study by Leithwood et al. (2023) in Texas schools and support the cross-cultural validity of the instrument (Table 1).

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency Reliability ($n = 152$)

Domain	Items (n)	Mean (M)	*SD*	Level	*Cronbach's α*
Setting Directions	4	4.46	0.59	High	.910
Building Relationships and Developing People	6	4.42	0.60	High	.920
(Re)Designing the Organization	5	4.44	0.55	High	.904

Improving the Instructional Program	7	4.33	0.60	High	.943
SSLS Overall	22	4.40	0.56	High	.977

Note. Level interpretation from Pallant (2020): 1.00–2.33 = Low; 2.34–3.67 = Moderate; 3.68–5.00 = High.

Between-School Comparisons

One-way ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences across the three schools for all four domains and the overall SSLS score (all $p < .001$). Effect sizes (η^2) ranged from .13 to .18, indicating that between 13% and 18% of variance in leadership practice ratings was attributable to school membership, representing medium to large effects according to conventional benchmarks.

Levene's test indicated non-homogeneous variances across groups for all domains (all $p < .05$); therefore, Welch's robust F-statistic was reported and Games-Howell post-hoc comparisons were conducted. Post-hoc analyses revealed a consistent pattern: School C (rural) reported significantly higher scores than both School A and School B (urban schools) for all domains (all pairwise comparisons $p < .001$). In contrast, differences between the two urban schools (School A versus School B) were not statistically significant for any domain (all pairwise $p > .05$), suggesting comparable leadership practice levels in urban settings despite different school types (Table 2).

Table 2 ANOVA Results and Descriptive Statistics by School

Domain	School A (n = 48) M (SD)	School B (n = 55) M (SD)	School C (n = 49) M (SD)	Welch's F (df1, df2)	p	η^2
Setting Directions	4.31 (0.64)	4.36 (0.62)	4.72 (0.40)	11.18 (2,95.6)	<.001	.13
Building Relationships and Developing People	4.22 (0.66)	4.30 (0.59)	4.73 (0.39)	16.08 (2,93.2)	<.001	.18
(Re)Designing the Organization	4.25 (0.61)	4.33 (0.52)	4.73 (0.38)	15.23 (2,91.8)	<.001	.17
Improving the Instructional Program	4.11 (0.66)	4.22 (0.58)	4.66 (0.44)	15.46 (2,92.5)	<.001	.17
SSLS Overall	4.21 (0.62)	4.30 (0.54)	4.70 (0.39)	16.48 (2,94.3)	<.001	.18

Note. Games–Howell post-hoc comparisons indicated that School C scored significantly higher than School A and School B across all domains (all $p < .001$). Differences between School A and School B were not statistically significant (all $p > .05$). η^2 = eta squared effect size.

Urban-Rural Comparisons

Independent samples t-test with Welch adjustment (due to non-homogeneous variances based on Levene's test, all $p < .05$) compared urban schools combined ($n = 103$) versus the rural school ($n = 49$). Results showed that the rural school reported significantly higher scores than urban schools for all four domains and overall SSLS (all $p < .001$) with large effect sizes (*Cohen's d* ranging from 0.70 to 0.86).

The largest effect size was observed for Improving the Instructional Program ($d = 0.86$), followed by overall SSLS score (d = 0.85), Building Relationships and Developing People ($d = 0.84$), (Re)Designing the Organization (d = 0.83), and Setting Directions ($d = 0.70$). All effect sizes substantially exceeded Cohen's threshold for large effects ($d \geq 0.80$), indicating not only statistical significance but also substantive practical significance in the magnitude of differences (Table 3).

Table 3 Urban-Rural School Comparison

Domain	Urban	Rural	*Welch's t*	*df*	*p*	*Cohen's d*
Setting Directions	4.33 (0.63)	4.72 (0.40)	-4.71	114.3	<.001	0.70
Building Relationships and Developing People	4.27 (0.62)	4.73 (0.39)	-5.65	122.8	<.001	0.84
(Re)Designing the Organization	4.30 (0.56)	4.73 (0.38)	-5.49	121.6	<.001	0.83
Improving the Instructional Program	4.18 (0.61)	4.66 (0.44)	-5.53	118.5	<.001	0.86
SSLS Overall	4.26 (0.58)	4.70 (0.39)	-5.74	120.4	<.001	0.85

Note. Welch-adjusted t-values and degrees of freedom reported due to violation of homogeneity of variance assumption (Levene $p < .05$ for all domains). Cohen's *d* interpretation: 0.20 = small; 0.50 = medium; 0.80 = large effect size.

DISCUSSION

High Levels of Leadership Practices Among Exemplary Principals

The finding that exemplary principal leadership practices were rated at high levels overall ($M = 4.40$) aligns aligns with international research using SSLS, though scores in this study exceeded those reported by Leithwood et al. (2023) in Texas elementary schools ($M = 3.89$). This difference likely reflects the purposive selection of formally recognized exemplary principals through TBBK and excellence awards, whereas the Texas study involved general school samples without explicit exemplary principal selection. The finding provides supporting evidence that principals recognized as exemplary through Malaysia's merit-based promotion system demonstrate strong leadership practices as perceived by their teachers.

Setting Directions emerged as the highest-rated domain ($M = 4.46$), consistent with international literature emphasizing that effective principals prioritize articulating clear vision, communicating high expectations, and providing organizational direction as foundational leadership mechanisms (Hallinger, 2018; Robinson et al., 2008). This pattern mirrors Leithwood et al.'s (2023) original findings where Setting Directions also received the highest ratings ($M = 3.99$). The consistency across cultural contexts suggests this domain represents a universal priority for exemplary educational leadership. In the Malaysian policy context, emphasis on vision and direction aligns well with PPPM 2013–2025 priorities emphasizing achievement-focused leadership and organizational accountability (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

Improving the Instructional Program, while remaining at high levels overall, recorded relatively lower scores ($M = 4.33$). This pattern echoes findings from Lazaridou and Iordanidis' (2011) Greek study and may reflect inherent tensions between intensive instructional leadership demands and competing time pressures from extensive administrative, reporting, and compliance responsibilities that burden Malaysian principals (Bush, 2021). Despite Malaysia's policy emphasis on principals as instructional leaders, structural and systemic constraints may limit the time and attention even exemplary principals can devote to directly observing teaching, providing feedback, and supporting pedagogical improvement.

Psychometric Evidence of SSLS in Malaysian Context

The excellent internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .977$) closely matches findings from Leithwood et al. (2023) in Texas ($\alpha = .91–.99$) and translated Chinese versions ($\alpha \approx .98$), providing evidence that SSLS functions reliably in Pahang state secondary school contexts. All four domain-level alphas exceeded the .90 threshold for excellent reliability, surpassing Nunnally and Bernstein's (1994) recommended standards.

The very high internal consistency observed in this study may reflect strong conceptual coherence among the items measuring leadership practices. However, reliability coefficients approaching unity may also indicate

potential overlap among indicators. Future research may further examine the scale structure using more detailed psychometric analyses to explore indicator distinctiveness.

These results support the concept of validity generalization for the SSL framework across diverse cultural contexts and add evidence that leadership instruments developed through international research synthesis can function effectively in Southeast Asian educational settings when appropriate translation and cultural adaptation procedures are followed. This study represents one of the first published reliability studies of SSLS in Malaysian contexts, establishing a foundation for broader research use.

Rural Leadership Excellence: Challenging Deficit Assumptions

The finding that rural schoolteachers reported significantly higher perceptions across all leadership domains ($p < .001$, $d = 0.70–0.86$) represents this study's most striking contribution. This pattern challenges deficit-oriented assumptions that urban schools with superior resource access and professional development opportunities would demonstrate more effective leadership, even among formally recognized exemplary principals. Several interconnected factors may explain this pattern.

First, school size and relationship intimacy effects likely play important roles. Smaller rural schools (School C $\approx$ 500 students) compared to larger urban schools (School A $\approx$ 800; School B $\approx$ 700) enable principals to develop deeper personal relationships with individual teachers through more frequent meaningful interactions. Relational leadership theory emphasizes relationship quality between leaders and followers as foundational to leadership effectiveness (Uhl-Bien, 2006). In smaller schools, teachers may experience more direct interactions with the principal, which can enhance perceived support and trust. This may particularly elevate ratings for Building Relationships and Developing People ($d = 0.84$).

Second, comparative reference point theory suggests teachers' leadership evaluations depend partly on comparison standards shaped by local contexts (Marsh & Hau, 2003). In resource-limited rural settings, exemplary principals' efforts to secure teaching materials, arrange professional development despite geographical barriers, or improve facilities may be perceived as especially effective compared to local expectations, whereas similar efforts by urban exemplary principals in well-resourced schools may be viewed as routine.

Third, the specific rural exemplary principal in this study (School C) may demonstrate leadership practices well-suited to rural contexts. Qualitative case study research would be valuable to identify specific strategies, daily practices, and leadership adaptations employed. Exemplary rural principals may excel at fostering strong community partnerships, operating with greater autonomy and flexibility, adapting through informal decision-making structures, and building cohesive professional communities through necessity-driven collaboration.

Fourth, rural schools may benefit from reduced bureaucratic constraints compared to higher-profile urban schools subject to intensive monitoring and compliance expectations. Greater autonomy may enable innovation and responsive adaptation to local needs, contributing to stronger perceived leadership (Leithwood, 2021).

The largest urban–rural difference emerged for Improving the Instructional Program ($d = 0.86$), suggesting exemplary rural principals may invest more time in classroom observation, instructional feedback and pedagogical support compared to their urban counterparts. However, given that only one rural school was included, replication across multiple rural contexts is necessary before drawing broader conclusions.

The SSLS demonstrates potential as an evidence-based complementary instrument to support leadership development initiatives and reflective evaluation of school leadership practices in Malaysia. With further large-scale validation across diverse school contexts, the instrument could contribute to broader system-level efforts aimed at strengthening leadership quality and accountability.

CONCLUSION

This study provides strong preliminary reliability evidence supporting the suitability of SSLS (α =.977) for measuring exemplary principal leadership practices in Malaysian secondary school contexts, supporting its use in future research, programme evaluation, and leadership assessment. Findings suggest that internationally developed leadership frameworks such as SSL can function effectively in Malaysian contexts when appropriately

adapted. Exemplary principals in Pahang state demonstrate leadership practices at high levels across all SSL domains, with Setting Directions receiving the highest ratings, consistent with international patterns and supporting Malaysia's formal exemplary principal recognition system.

Most significantly, this study revealed substantial urban–rural differences with large effect sizes (d=0.70–0.86) favouring rural contexts, challenging deficit assumptions about rural education and demonstrating that exemplary leadership can be perceived as strong in diverse settings. This finding opens important research directions regarding contextual factors enabling rural exemplary leadership success.

Future research recommendations include: (i) large-scale multi-state studies with random sampling to enable national generalization; (ii) multiple-rater approaches incorporating principal self-assessment, student perceptions, and parent perspectives for comprehensive triangulation; (iii) longitudinal designs tracking leadership development trajectories and linking changes in leadership practices to changes in school outcomes; (iv) comprehensive Four Paths Model testing using structural equation modelling to examine indirect effects through mediating variables; (v) comparative studies of exemplary versus typical principals to identify differentiating practices that distinguish excellence; and (vi) in-depth qualitative case studies of exemplary rural principals to document specific strategies and contextual adaptations that enable their success.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved three purposively selected schools led by recognized exemplary principals, which may limit the generalizability of results to typical school contexts. Second, the inclusion of only one rural school limits the robustness of the urban–rural comparison, and differences observed should therefore be interpreted with caution. Third, the SSLS measures leadership practices at the collective school leadership level; although the exemplary principal serves as the central leader, teacher responses may also reflect perceptions of other leadership team members. Finally, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference, and the findings represent associations observed at a single point in time.

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