

Principals' Communication Styles as Predictors of School Organisational Culture: Evidence from Tamil Primary Schools in Malaysia

Punitha A/P Subramaniam^{1*} & Subadrah Madhawa Nair²

^{1,2} Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR International University, Kelana Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

***Corresponding author:**

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ABSTRACT

School organisational culture is widely accepted as a determinant of teacher performance and pupil outcomes, yet the specific communicative behaviours through which principals shape that culture remain insufficiently specified, particularly in minority-language school systems. This study examined the relationship between seven dimensions of principals' communication styles and school organisational culture in Malaysian national-type Tamil primary schools (SJKT), a sector that has attracted almost no empirical attention in the educational leadership literature. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was administered to 400 SJKT teachers drawn through stratified random sampling from five states, namely Perak, Kedah, Selangor, Johor and Pahang. Communication styles were measured using a 25-item instrument adapted from de Vries et al. (2009) covering expressiveness, preciseness, niceness, supportiveness, reflectiveness, threateningness and emotionality, while school organisational culture was measured using a 17-item instrument adapted from Wagner (2006). Data were analysed in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27 using Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression. Principals' overall communication styles were moderately and positively associated with school organisational culture ($r = .537$, $p < .001$), and all seven dimensions correlated significantly with culture, with niceness the strongest ($r = .559$) and emotionality the weakest ($r = .191$). The seven dimensions jointly explained 43.6% of the variance in school organisational culture, $F(7, 392) = 43.25$, $p < .001$, with niceness ($\beta = .543$), supportiveness ($\beta = .363$) and threateningness ($\beta = .271$) emerging as significant positive predictors. The findings position relational warmth rather than task-focused clarity as the principal communicative lever on culture in a collectivist school setting, and they complicate the assumption that assertive communication is uniformly corrosive to school culture.

Keywords: principals' communication styles; school organisational culture; educational leadership; Tamil primary schools; niceness; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Organisational culture is the shared set of values, norms, beliefs and behavioural expectations that gives a school its distinctive character and regulates how its members work together. It is not an inert backdrop to schooling but an active determinant of collaboration, professional learning, teacher wellbeing and, ultimately, pupil achievement (Kareem et al., 2023; Thien & Lee, 2023). Because culture is transmitted, contested and revised largely through talk, the communicative conduct of the school principal occupies a central place in any account of how culture is formed. Deal and Peterson (2009) argued that principals shape culture through storytelling, symbol management, ritual facilitation and the articulation of vision, all of which are enacted communicatively. Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) went further, treating leadership communication as constitutive rather than merely expressive: culture does not exist prior to the discourse that describes it but is continuously produced through framing and meaning-making.

If that theoretical position is sound, then the practical question for school improvement is not whether principals should communicate well but which communicative behaviours matter most. This is where the existing evidence base becomes thin. A substantial body of research links global leadership constructs such as transformational, instructional or servant leadership to cultural and motivational outcomes (Karakose et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Ouyang et al., 2026), but such constructs bundle communication together with decision-making, resource allocation and instructional supervision. When a principal is told that transformational leadership improves school culture, the advice offers little behavioural guidance. Communication style research, by contrast, decomposes leader talk into measurable dimensions that can be observed, trained and appraised (de Vries et al., 2009, 2013). The dimensional approach permits a question that global leadership constructs cannot answer: among the several ways a principal may habitually speak to staff, which ones actually move the culture?

The present study poses that question in a setting that has been almost entirely overlooked. Malaysia's national-type Tamil primary schools, known as Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil (SJKT), educate a substantial share of Malaysian Indian pupils and occupy a distinctive institutional position. Their principals operate at the intersection of Tamil cultural expectations that emphasise collectivism, hierarchical respect and community solidarity, a Malay-medium national administrative apparatus, and the vocal expectations of Tamil-speaking parents and community organisations (Hofstede et al., 2010; Sekharan & Ayiaboo, 2022). Community bodies and media reporting have raised recurring concerns about principal to teacher miscommunication in SJKT, declining teacher morale and elevated transfer requests (Tamil Foundation Malaysia, 2022; Malay Mail, 2023), while the Malaysia Education Plan 2026 to 2035 places supportive school environments at the centre of its educator thrust (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2026). The empirical literature on SJKT leadership, however, consists of a small number of studies on transformational leadership and job satisfaction (Krishnan et al., 2023; Sagathevan & Mohd Izham, 2022; Nair et al., 2024), none of which isolates communication style dimensions or takes organisational culture as an outcome.

This article therefore reports the culture-focused component of a larger study of principal communication in SJKT. Two research questions are addressed. First, is there a significant relationship between principals' communication styles, both overall and at the level of individual dimensions, and school organisational culture? Second, do the seven communication style dimensions collectively and uniquely predict school organisational culture? By answering these questions with data from 400 teachers across five states, the study supplies the first dimensional profile of leadership communication in the Tamil primary school sector and tests whether the relational emphasis predicted by collectivist cultural theory is borne out in the pattern of coefficients.

Problem Statement and Research Gap

Clear, supportive and consistent principal communication is associated with teacher professional growth, sustained motivation and collaborative working relationships, while ambiguous, authoritarian or erratic communication erodes morale and weakens the collective norms on which school improvement depends (Nurtulawati et al., 2025; Sofia et al., 2023). The stakes attached to this proposition have risen in Malaysia, where the Malaysia Education Plan 2026 to 2035 assigns principals and teachers primary responsibility for delivering national educational transformation and identifies motivationally supportive school environments as an explicit policy objective (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2026). Policy of this kind assumes that school leaders know which of their own behaviours produce supportive environments. The empirical basis for that assumption is thinner than the policy language implies.

The problem is sharper in national-type Tamil primary schools. SJKT principals communicate simultaneously into three constituencies with different expectations: a Tamil school community that values collectivism, hierarchical respect and community solidarity; a Malay-medium national administrative system with its own reporting and compliance conventions; and Tamil-speaking parents and community organisations that monitor school affairs closely (Hofstede et al., 2010; Sekharan & Ayiaboo, 2022). Tamil education advocacy bodies and national media have reported recurring principal to teacher miscommunication in SJKT, alongside declining morale and rising transfer requests (Tamil Foundation

Malaysia, 2022; Malay Mail, 2023), and departmental statistics indicate higher average transfer request rates in Tamil schools than in national schools (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022). These reports identify a problem but do not diagnose it, because they treat communication as a single undifferentiated quality that is either present or absent.

Three gaps in the research literature follow from this. The first is a construct gap. Most educational leadership research in Southeast Asia examines global leadership styles, whether transformational, instructional, managerial or servant, and reports their association with cultural and performance outcomes (Karakose et al., 2024; Mulyana, 2024; Widodo et al., 2024). Such constructs bundle communication with decision-making, resource allocation and instructional supervision, so a positive finding cannot be converted into behavioural guidance for a practising principal. Communication style research resolves leader talk into measurable dimensions that can be observed, coached and appraised (de Vries et al., 2009, 2013), yet this dimensional approach has rarely been applied to school culture as an outcome.

The second is an aggregation gap. Where communication has been examined in Malaysian education, it has generally been treated as a composite. Mohamed and Zainal Abidin (2021) reported a correlation of $r = .574$ between principals' communication and school culture in Selangor vocational colleges, a valuable finding that nevertheless leaves unanswered the question of which communicative behaviours carried the association. Without disaggregation, the practical recommendation reduces to an instruction to communicate better.

The third and most consequential is a contextual gap. The SJKT sector is effectively absent from the empirical record on leadership communication. The small body of research on Tamil school leadership has addressed transformational leadership and job satisfaction (Krishnan et al., 2023; Sagathevan & Mohd Izham, 2022), technology integration (Thumbarayan et al., 2024) and pandemic disruption (Sekharan & Ayiaboo, 2022). No published study has examined principals' communication style dimensions in relation to school organisational culture in SJKT. This omission matters beyond questions of representation. If the relative weight of communicative dimensions is culturally conditioned, as collectivist theory predicts, then findings generated in national schools or in Western school systems cannot be assumed to transfer to a sector whose relational premises differ.

The present study addresses these three gaps by asking two questions. First, is there a significant relationship between principals' communication styles, both as a composite and at the level of seven individual dimensions, and school organisational culture in SJKT? Second, do the seven dimensions collectively and uniquely predict school organisational culture, and which dimensions carry the greatest predictive weight?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Styles as a Leadership Construct

Communication style refers to the characteristic manner in which a person interacts verbally and non-verbally, signalling how literal meaning should be interpreted (Norton, 1983). The construct is behavioural rather than attitudinal, which makes it attractive for leadership development because styles are, in principle, modifiable. De Vries et al. (2009) established the content and dimensionality of communication styles empirically and subsequently developed the Communication Styles Inventory as a behavioural model with demonstrated links to personality and to leadership outcomes (de Vries et al., 2010, 2013; Nair et al., 2021). The dimensions used in the present study, namely expressiveness, preciseness, niceness, supportiveness, reflectiveness, threateningness and emotionality, capture distinct communicative repertoires: enthusiasm and animation, clarity and structure, warmth and courtesy, encouragement and validation, deliberation before speaking, assertive or intimidating pressure, and open display of affect.

The value of retaining seven dimensions rather than collapsing them into a global index lies in their potential divergence. De Vries et al. (2010) found that different communication styles related differently to knowledge sharing and to perceived leader effectiveness, and Zheng et al. (2025) reported similar differentiation in counselling contexts. In educational settings, Sofia et al. (2023) and Nurtillawati et al.

(2025) both associated principals' communicative effectiveness with teacher performance, while Talaumbauna et al. (2023) traced, qualitatively, how a principal's habit of open two-way communication gradually produced a school-wide culture of collaboration. Peace and Kola (2024) similarly positioned communication as the mechanism binding educational leadership to stakeholder engagement. What these studies establish collectively is that communication matters; what they do not establish is which components of it matter most, and under what cultural conditions.

School Organisational Culture

Schein (2010) analysed organisational culture at three levels: observable artefacts, espoused values, and underlying shared assumptions. The framework remains the reference point for contemporary work, including recent applications that use it to explain how leadership competencies shape culture and structure (Obeng et al., 2025; Westover, 2024). In school-specific terms, Wagner (2006) operationalised culture through collaborative dimensions such as professional collaboration, affiliative collegiality and self-determination and efficacy, an approach that has proved workable in Asian school systems. Kareem et al. (2023) demonstrated that school organisational culture predicts teacher professional behaviour across diverse educational settings, and Thien and Lee (2023) showed that culture dimensions shaped by principal behaviour predicted teacher wellbeing across under-enrolled and high-enrolment Malaysian primary schools. Plaku and Leka (2025) reaffirmed the leader's formative role in shaping school culture, and Akpa et al. (2021) concluded from a broad review that organisations whose members share values and are served by an effective communication system develop stronger collective identity and higher performance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three complementary theories inform the present analysis. Cultural Leadership Theory (Deal & Peterson, 2009) positions the principal as the primary architect of school culture and predicts a positive association between the quality of principal communication and cultural health. Communication Leadership Theory (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014) supplies the constitutive account described above, and it also predicts that the association will be moderate rather than overwhelming, since culture once established acquires inertia independent of any single communicative act. Social Capital Theory, as synthesised by Van Bakel and Horak (2024), specifies the mechanism: open and supportive communication builds trust, establishes reciprocity norms and strengthens information channels, and these resources are especially consequential in collectivist settings characterised by strong dyadic ties and community-embedded networks. Taken together, the three frameworks predict not only a positive communication to culture relationship but also a specific pattern within it, in which relational dimensions outperform task-focused dimensions in a collectivist school community.

Empirical Evidence on Leadership Communication and School Outcomes

Recent quantitative evidence supports a leadership to culture pathway while leaving its communicative components unspecified. Nabella et al. (2022) found that leadership and organisational culture jointly explained a very large share of variance in school governance in Indonesian secondary schools, with direct path coefficients of .547 for leadership and .315 for culture, although communication style was not modelled as an independent variable. Turyahikayo et al. (2024) demonstrated in four Ugandan public universities that transformational and transactional leadership styles significantly predicted organisational communication quality, together accounting for 43.2% of its variance, a result that positions communication as an outcome of leadership rather than as its mechanism. Widodo et al. (2024) reported that organisational culture mediated the relationship between principal leadership and teacher task performance in a sample of 450 Indonesian teachers, and Yang and Xu (2026) found that principal visionary leadership predicted teacher instructional innovation through workplace wellbeing and collaboration.

Studies focused on teacher-level outcomes reach compatible conclusions. Berkovich and Hassan (2024) linked principals' digital instructional leadership to teachers' intrinsic motivation, He et al. (2024) established instructional leadership as a predictor of teacher professional development, and Dwi and Chan (2022)

associated principals' leadership behaviour with teacher job satisfaction in Indonesian preschools. What this body of work establishes is a robust and cross-nationally replicated association between how principals lead and how schools function culturally. What it does not establish, and what motivates the dimensional design adopted here, is which specific communicative behaviours within leadership carry that association, and whether their relative importance holds constant across cultural settings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, consistent with established practice in educational leadership research where the aim is to estimate the magnitude and direction of relationships across a dispersed population (Hair et al., 2019). The design supports correlational and regression modelling but does not permit causal inference, a constraint acknowledged in Section 8.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised teachers serving in national-type Tamil primary schools in Peninsular Malaysia. Stratified random sampling was employed, with the five states holding the largest SJKT populations, namely Perak, Kedah, Selangor, Johor and Pahang, forming the strata. Eighty teachers were drawn from each state, balanced equally by gender, yielding a final sample of $N = 400$.

Stratification by state was chosen because SJKT are unevenly distributed and differ in enrolment size, urbanicity and community composition, so a simple random sample risked over-representing a single state's conditions (Rahman et al., 2022). A sample of 400 comfortably exceeds the requirement for multiple regression with seven predictors under conventional power assumptions.

Instrumentation

Principals' communication styles were measured with a 25-item instrument adapted from de Vries et al. (2009), covering seven dimensions: expressiveness, preciseness, niceness, supportiveness, reflectiveness, threateningness and emotionality. Teachers rated the communicative behaviour of their own principal.

School organisational culture was measured with a 17-item instrument adapted from Wagner (2006), addressing professional collaboration, affiliative collegiality and self-determination and efficacy. Both instruments used a five-point Likert response format. Items were reviewed by subject experts for contextual appropriateness to the SJKT setting before administration.

A pilot study with 42 Tamil school teachers, who were excluded from the main sample, established internal consistency. Confirmatory factor analysis supported construct validity, with all item factor loadings exceeding the recommended threshold of .40. Reliability coefficients are reported in Table 1.

It should be noted that alpha values in the .90 range, while conventionally described as excellent, can also signal item redundancy, and recent methodological commentary has cautioned against treating alpha as a sufficient index of measurement quality (Cheung et al., 2023; Hussey et al., 2025). The values are therefore reported alongside the factor analytic evidence rather than in place of it.

Table 1 : Internal consistency of the study instruments in the pilot study ($N = 42$)

Instrument	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Principals' communication styles	25	.854
School organisational culture	17	.944

Note. Both values exceed the .70 criterion for research use.

Data Collection and Ethical Procedures

Questionnaires were distributed in self-administered and online formats following approval from the relevant institutional and state education authorities. Participation was voluntary and conditional on written or electronic consent. No personally identifying information was collected, responses were anonymised at the point of submission, and participants were assured that their responses would not affect their employment or their relationship with their principal. Findings are reported only in aggregate, so that no individual or school is identifiable. Procedures followed established ethical principles for research with human participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. Normality of the composite scores was assessed using skewness and kurtosis alongside visual inspection of histogram, normal Q-Q plot and boxplot. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to address the first research question at both the composite and dimension levels, and simultaneous multiple linear regression was used to address the second, with the seven dimensions entered as predictors of school organisational culture. The teacher motivation component of the wider study is reported separately and is not analysed here, so that the culture outcome can be examined at dimensional depth.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

The composite score of the study variables produced a mean of 247.09 (SD = 27.34, N = 400), with skewness of -1.713 and kurtosis of -1.494. Both values fall within the ranges conventionally regarded as acceptable for parametric analysis, and visual inspection of the histogram, normal Q-Q plot and boxplot supported this conclusion. A small number of outliers appeared at both tails but were retained given the sample size and their negligible influence on the distribution. Parametric procedures were therefore judged appropriate.

Communication Styles and School Organisational Culture

At the composite level, principals' communication styles were significantly and positively related to school organisational culture, $r = .537$, $p < .001$, indicating that approximately 28.8% of the variance in culture is shared with communication style when the latter is treated as a single construct. The null hypothesis for the first research question was rejected. Disaggregating by dimension produced the pattern presented in Table 2.

All seven dimensions correlated significantly and positively with school organisational culture, but the magnitudes varied considerably, from a moderate to strong association for niceness to a weak association for emotionality.

Table 2 Pearson correlations between communication style dimensions and school organisational culture (N = 400)

Dimension	r	p	Rank
Niceness	.559**	< .001	1
Supportiveness	.411**	< .001	2
Reflectiveness	.327**	< .001	3

Threateningness	.317**	< .001	4
Preciseness	.304**	< .001	5
Expressiveness	.297**	< .001	6
Emotionality	.191**	< .001	7
Overall communication style	.537**	< .001	

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Predictive contribution of the seven dimensions

Simultaneous multiple regression with the seven dimensions as predictors produced a significant model, $R = .660$, $R^2 = .436$, adjusted $R^2 = .426$, standard error of the estimate = .525, $F(7, 392) = 43.25$, $p < .001$. The seven communication style dimensions therefore accounted for 43.6% of the variance in school organisational culture. The regression sum of squares was 83.396 against a residual of 107.985 and a total of 191.381. The null hypothesis for the second research question was rejected.

Table 3 :Regression coefficients for communication style dimensions predicting school organisational culture

Predictor	B	SE B	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	.927	.255		3.634	< .001
Expressiveness	-.235	.088	-.184	-2.677	.008
Preciseness	.061	.078	.051	.777	.438
Niceness	.610	.065	.543	9.431	< .001
Supportiveness	.418	.097	.363	4.314	< .001
Reflectiveness	-.231	.076	-.233	-3.017	.003
Threateningness	.157	.030	.271	5.228	< .001
Emotionality	.032	.025	.065	1.260	.208

Note. Dependent variable: school organisational culture. B = unstandardised coefficient; beta = standardised coefficient.

As Table 3 shows, niceness was the dominant positive predictor ($\beta = .543$, $p < .001$), followed by supportiveness ($\beta = .363$, $p < .001$) and threateningness ($\beta = .271$, $p < .001$). Two dimensions that had correlated positively with culture at the bivariate level became significant negative predictors once the others were controlled: expressiveness ($\beta = -.184$, $p = .008$) and reflectiveness ($\beta = -.233$, $p = .003$). Preciseness ($\beta = .051$, $p = .438$) and emotionality ($\beta = .065$, $p = .208$) did not reach significance.

DISCUSSION

The communication to Culture Relationship

The composite correlation of $r = .537$ confirms that principal communication and school culture move

together in SJKT, and its magnitude is informative in itself. It sits marginally below the $r = .574$ reported by Mohamed and Zainal Abidin (2021) in Malaysian vocational colleges, and the convergence of two independent Malaysian studies on a moderate rather than strong association suggests a shared ceiling rather than a sector-specific result. Three explanations merit consideration. First, culture has inertia. Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) predict exactly this pattern: if culture is constituted through the accumulation of communicative acts over time, then any cross-sectional measurement captures a sediment laid down by predecessors as much as by the current principal. Second, SJKT culture is shaped by forces that lie outside the principal's communicative reach, including resource constraints, community expectations and the demands of sustaining Tamil-medium instruction inside a national curriculum framework. Third, the single-point measurement design cannot capture cumulative effect. A moderate correlation is thus the theoretically expected result rather than a disappointing one, and claims that principal communication is the master variable in school culture should be treated with corresponding caution.

Placing the model against comparable studies also clarifies what a 43.6% explanatory share means. Turyahikayo et al. (2024) accounted for 43.2% of variance in organisational communication from two global leadership styles, and Nabella et al. (2022) reported far higher figures for school governance using leadership and culture together. Comparison across these studies is complicated by the fact that they model different outcomes with different predictor sets, and the tendency in parts of this literature to report very high variance explained should invite scrutiny rather than emulation, since inflated R^2 values in single-source survey designs are frequently a symptom of construct overlap between predictor and outcome measures. The present model is more modest and, for that reason, more defensible: seven communicative behaviours reported by teachers account for somewhat less than half the variance in a culture measure also reported by teachers, which leaves ample room for the structural, historical and community determinants that no communication model should claim to absorb.

The Primacy of Niceness

The clearest finding of the study is the dominance of niceness, which was both the strongest bivariate correlate ($r = .559$) and by a wide margin the strongest unique predictor ($\beta = .543$). Interpersonal warmth, courtesy and friendliness, in other words, did more work than clarity, deliberation or enthusiasm. This is consistent with Social Capital Theory's account of collectivist settings, where trust and reciprocity are built through relational signalling and where the quality of relationships embedded within authority structures carries disproportionate weight (Hofstede et al., 2010; Van Bakel and Horak, 2024). It also converges with Chiu's (2022) evidence on the salience of relatedness need satisfaction in collectivist educational contexts and with Ouyang et al.'s (2026) systematic review of servant leadership benefits for teachers.

The finding nonetheless deserves a sceptical reading. Niceness and school culture were both rated by the same teachers at the same moment, and a teacher who feels warmly towards a courteous principal may plausibly rate the school's collegiality more generously for reasons of affective consistency rather than because collaboration is objectively stronger. Common method variance is therefore a live alternative explanation for the size of the niceness coefficient specifically, since niceness is the dimension most likely to be entangled with general affect towards the principal. The claim that warmth builds culture is well supported by the convergence of theory and data, but the effect size should be read as an upper bound.

Supportiveness and the Relational Cluster

Supportiveness was the second significant positive predictor ($\beta = .363$), which aligns with Servant Leadership Theory's emphasis on empathic and caring communication as the mechanism through which leaders shape collaborative environments (Van Dierendonck, 2011; Ouyang et al., 2026). Supportive communication creates the conditions of psychological safety that Schein (2010) identified as prerequisites for cultural evolution towards trust and shared commitment, and it corresponds to the involvement dimension that Akpa et al. (2021) identified as critical to effective organisational culture. Read together, niceness and supportiveness form a relational cluster that accounts for the great majority of the model's explanatory power, while the task-focused dimension of preciseness contributed nothing detectable once

relational quality was controlled. For a literature that has often emphasised clarity of instructional communication, this is a corrective finding: in SJKT, clarity without warmth appears to be culturally inert.

The anomaly of Threateningness

Threateningness correlated positively with culture ($r = .317$) and remained a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .271$), a result that runs against the direction most Western-derived frameworks would anticipate. Two readings are available. The culturally situated reading holds that in school communities marked by hierarchical respect for educational authority, firm and assertive communication is decoded as legitimate stewardship of standards rather than as intimidation, a possibility consistent with the recognition in communication accommodation research that status-distinct communication can be culturally valued (Giles et al., 2023). On this account, teachers experience a principal who upholds expectations plainly as contributing to, not degrading, a disciplined and purposeful culture.

The measurement reading is less flattering and should not be dismissed. The threateningness items may, in this population, have been interpreted as assertiveness or firmness rather than as coercion, in which case the construct being measured is not the one the instrument's developers intended. Testing between these readings requires evidence the present design cannot supply, such as cognitive interviewing of items or measurement invariance testing against samples where the dimension behaves conventionally. What can be said is that the finding is inconsistent with a simple view of assertive leadership communication as uniformly harmful, and that the wider study of which this article forms part found threateningness to be negatively associated with teacher motivation. The tension between a positive cultural association and a negative motivational one is itself substantively interesting: firmness may sustain the collective order while eroding individual commitment, and treating culture as a proxy for teacher wellbeing would obscure that divergence.

Interpreting the Negative Coefficients

Expressiveness and reflectiveness reversed sign between the correlation and regression analyses. The most defensible interpretation is statistical rather than substantive. With predictor intercorrelations as high as .807, the regression partitions a small and unstable slice of unique variance to each of the weaker dimensions, and the resulting coefficients are sensitive to sampling variability. It would be an overreach to advise principals to be less expressive or less reflective on this evidence. The more useful conclusion is that expressiveness and reflectiveness carry no independent cultural benefit once warmth and support are in place, which is a statement about redundancy rather than about harm. This also indicates a limitation of applying a seven-dimension model when the dimensions are so highly correlated in practice, and future work in this population might profitably test a reduced two-factor or three-factor structure before entering dimensions simultaneously.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

The study extends Cultural Leadership Theory by specifying which communicative behaviours carry its predicted effect, and it supports the constitutive claim of Communication Leadership Theory while placing an empirical boundary on it. It also contributes a contextual qualification to communication style theory: the relative weighting of dimensions is not culturally invariant. Where task-focused dimensions such as preciseness might be expected to dominate in individualist organisational contexts, the relational dimensions dominated here, and a dimension normatively coded as negative behaved positively. Communication style frameworks developed in Northern European samples therefore require validation, not merely translation, before use in collectivist school systems.

Practical Implications

For principal preparation and appraisal in SJKT, the findings suggest a reordering of priorities. Programmes

that concentrate on clarity of directives and administrative precision address the dimension with the weakest demonstrated cultural yield, whereas structured attention to relational communication, that is, courtesy in routine exchanges, visible encouragement, and consistent expressions of interest in teacher wellbeing, addresses the dimensions that carry the model. State education departments could incorporate relational communication indicators into principal appraisal instruments, and district mentoring could use the seven-dimension profile as a diagnostic tool rather than a global rating. The threateningness finding warrants a cautious formulation in practice: it should not be read as licence for coercive communication, particularly given the negative motivational association reported in the companion analysis, but rather as an indication that clear and firm articulation of standards is compatible with, and possibly supportive of, a healthy school culture when it coexists with warmth.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Four limitations qualify these conclusions. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; the association between communication and culture is almost certainly reciprocal, since a collaborative culture makes warm communication easier to sustain. Second, all variables were reported by the same source at one time point, so common method variance may inflate the observed relationships. Third, the sample was drawn from five states in Peninsular Malaysia and excludes Sabah, Sarawak and the smaller SJKT populations elsewhere, which constrains generalisation. Fourth, teachers rated their principal's communication as perceived, and perception may diverge from the principal's intent or from a third party's observation.

Four extensions follow directly. Longitudinal designs tracking culture across principal succession would separate accumulated culture from current communicative influence. Multi-source designs incorporating principal self-ratings and observational coding would address method variance. Qualitative work in SJKT is needed to establish how teachers themselves construe threateningness items, which is the single most consequential ambiguity in the present findings. Finally, comparative work across SJKT, national schools and Chinese national-type schools would test whether the relational primacy reported here is specific to Tamil school culture or common to Malaysian primary schooling.

CONCLUSION

This study provides the first dimensional account of principals' communication styles and school organisational culture in Malaysian Tamil primary schools. Communication styles were moderately and positively associated with culture at the composite level and significantly associated across all seven dimensions, and together they explained 43.6% of the variance in school organisational culture. Niceness and supportiveness emerged as the dominant positive predictors, while preciseness and emotionality contributed nothing unique, and threateningness behaved contrary to Western expectation. The practical message is concise: in SJKT, culture is built less through the precision of what principals say than through the warmth with which they say it. The theoretical message is that dimensional communication models imported into collectivist school systems must be revalidated rather than assumed, since both the ranking of dimensions and the valence of at least one of them appear to shift with cultural context.

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