

An Impact of Principals' Leadership Styles (Transformational, Autocratic, Democratic, and Empowering Leadership) on School Climate in Tamil Vernacular Schools in West Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

School climate in Malaysian Tamil Primary schools (SJKT) and the role of principal leadership in shaping this institutional outcome require careful examination. This study investigated the impact of principals' leadership styles, namely transformational, autocratic, democratic, and empowering leadership, on school climate in SJKT schools across West Malaysia. The study is grounded in Tagiuri and Litwin's (1968) Organisational Climate Theory and Coleman's (1988) Social Capital Theory. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Using equal stratified random sampling, 400 teachers were selected from 40 SJKT schools across five states in West Malaysia, from a target population of 8,707 SJKT teachers. A questionnaire measuring principal leadership styles (34 items) and school climate (15 items) was used to collect the quantitative data. Before the actual study, a pilot test was conducted among 40 SJKT teachers to confirm reliability and validity. Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.708 to 0.948, confirming acceptable to excellent reliability. Content validity was established through expert review, while construct validity was confirmed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis with all factor loadings exceeding 0.40. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS version 27, incorporating Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis. The findings revealed significant positive relationships between all four leadership styles and school climate. Empowering leadership was the strongest predictor of school climate, followed by democratic leadership and autocratic leadership. Transformational leadership did not emerge as an independent significant predictor when all four styles were entered together.

Keywords: Principals' Leadership Styles, School Climate, Tamil Primary Schools, SJKT, West Malaysia, Empowering Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian Tamil schools have a long and distinctive history rooted in the British colonial era, during which they were established to serve plantation labourers (Maniam et al., 2024). Maniam et al. (2024) traced the origins of Tamil schools to the Federated Malay States and documented how these institutions have continued to operate under persistent structural challenges, including inadequate funding, limited physical resources, and difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified teachers. Adams et al. (2023) further contextualise the Malaysian education system as one that retains the legacy of its colonial vernacular structure, wherein Tamil, Chinese, and Malay schools serve distinct ethnic communities with varying needs and governance arrangements.

Kareem et al. (2023), in a large-scale study of 1,173 teachers in Bengaluru, India, found that transformational leadership significantly predicted teachers' organisational commitment, illustrating that the effects of leadership style on teacher outcomes are shaped by the specific institutional and cultural setting in which they are examined. This context-sensitivity reinforces the need to study leadership and teacher

outcomes specifically within the SJKT institutional context, rather than assuming that findings from other settings will generalise directly. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 to 2025 explicitly commits to narrowing achievement gaps in vernacular schools while building stronger leadership capacity across all school types (Abu Bakar, 2023; Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013). As of 2023, there are 528 Tamil primary schools across the country, serving 78,444 students and employing 8,707 teachers (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2023). Behind these numbers lies a system under sustained pressure from declining enrolment, persistent teacher shortages, and chronic underfunding, pressures that make the quality of principal leadership a central institutional concern.

Among the variables through which principal leadership shapes teacher professional life, school climate occupies a particularly important position. School climate refers to teachers' shared perceptions of the organisational environment of their school, encompassing the quality of interpersonal relationships, professional norms, communication patterns, and the overall sense of belonging and safety within the institution (Tagiuri & Litwin, 1968). A positive school climate directly influences teacher motivation and the willingness to remain committed to the profession (Fang & Qi, 2023; Nair et al., 2024). In SJKT schools, where structural constraints and historical marginalisation have produced a distinctive institutional environment, the quality of school climate takes on particular urgency as both a measure of principal effectiveness and a predictor of teacher well-being.

Principal leadership is widely regarded as one of the most direct and malleable levers available to school systems seeking to strengthen the working environment teachers experience daily. Unlike broader structural conditions such as funding formulas or national curriculum policy, which are determined outside the school and difficult for any single institution to alter, the leadership behaviours a principal exhibits are enacted daily, are visible to every teacher, and are, in principle, amenable to development through training and reflective practice. This makes principal leadership a particularly actionable target for intervention when the goal is to improve school climate in under-resourced settings such as SJKT schools.

Malaysia's education system is characterised by a distinctive multicultural, multi-track structure in which National Schools, National-type Chinese Schools, and National-type Tamil Schools operate under a shared national curriculum but with markedly different levels of government funding, community resourcing, and public visibility. SJKT schools, serving a numerically smaller and historically marginalised community, have consistently received less policy attention than their Chinese-medium counterparts, despite facing comparable or greater structural challenges. This asymmetry means that findings generated in National or Chinese-medium school contexts cannot be assumed to generalise to the SJKT context, reinforcing the need for context-specific empirical investigation of the kind undertaken in this study.

Problem Statement

The UNESCO Global Report on Teachers (2024) warns that 44 million additional primary and secondary teachers will be needed worldwide if Sustainable Development Goal 4 is to be achieved by 2030. Teacher attrition has nearly doubled, rising from 4.6 per cent in 2015 to 9 per cent in 2022, and this trend cuts across countries regardless of income level. These global patterns lend broader significance to the present study, which examines how principal leadership in Malaysian SJKT schools connects to the very institutional conditions that determine whether teachers find their working environment meaningful and sustainable.

Despite the volume of international research on principal leadership and its relationship with teacher outcomes, no study has examined how all four principal leadership styles, namely transformational, autocratic, democratic, and empowering leadership, simultaneously influence school climate specifically within West Malaysian Tamil primary schools (Kamrozzaman et al., 2023; Adams et al., 2023). This study addresses that gap by providing the first comparative examination of how these four leadership styles differentially shape school climate in the SJKT context.

This gap is not merely conceptual but carries direct practical consequences. Where policymakers and school administrators lack context-specific evidence on which leadership styles most strongly shape school climate

in SJKT schools, leadership development programmes risk being designed around assumptions imported from unrelated settings, whether Western corporate leadership models or studies conducted in better-resourced Malaysian school types. Without empirical clarity on which leadership behaviours matter most for SJKT teachers specifically, training investments may be misallocated toward styles that show only weak or inconsistent associations with school climate in this context, while styles with the strongest demonstrated effects remain under-emphasised in professional development curricula. Addressing this gap is therefore a precondition for designing leadership interventions that are genuinely fit for purpose within the SJKT system.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant relationship between principals' overall leadership styles and school climate in Tamil Primary schools in West Malaysia?
2. Is there a significant relationship between principals' leadership styles (transformational leadership, autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, and empowering leadership) and school climate?
3. Do principals' leadership styles (transformational leadership, autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, and empowering leadership) significantly impact school climate in Tamil Primary schools in West Malaysia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Underpinning Theories

The theoretical framework of this study draws on two organisational and social theories to explain school climate as a function of principal leadership. Tagiuri and Litwin's (1968) Organisational Climate Theory provides the foundational conceptualisation of school climate as a multidimensional institutional phenomenon shaped by the cumulative social, ecological, and cultural forces within the organisation. This theory is particularly suitable because it accommodates the full range of organisational dimensions that characterise the SJKT school environment, including interpersonal relationships among teachers, communication norms between principals and staff, and the professional identity of the school community.

Tagiuri and Litwin's (1968) original formulation identifies four interlocking dimensions through which organisational climate is produced: ecology, referring to the physical and material characteristics of the institution; milieu, referring to the characteristics of the people within it; social system, referring to the patterned relationships between organisational members; and culture, referring to the shared values, beliefs, and meaning systems that guide behaviour. Applied to the SJKT context, the ecology dimension captures the physical resource constraints that have historically characterised Tamil schools, including inadequate infrastructure and teaching materials, with recent survey evidence confirming that these constraints remain more pronounced in rural SJKT schools than in urban ones (Ramalingam et al., 2025); the milieu dimension reflects the demographic and professional composition of the teaching staff; the social system dimension encompasses the formal and informal relationships between principals, teachers, and the wider school community; and the culture dimension reflects the distinctive values the Tamil community attaches to education, language preservation, and collective identity. Because principal leadership operates most directly on the social system and culture dimensions, through the relationships principals build and the values they model, this theoretical framework provides a coherent basis for expecting leadership style to be a significant driver of overall school climate.

Coleman's (1988) Social Capital Theory complements this framework by explaining how the relational networks and trust structures within a school generate the social capital that sustains positive institutional climates. Principals who foster trust-based relationships, encourage open communication, and build a sense of shared professional identity among teachers effectively cultivate the social capital that sustains a supportive school climate. In SJKT schools, where the Tamil community's strong relational values shape the

expectations teachers hold for their working environment, the quality of social capital generated by principal leadership is particularly consequential for school climate.

Coleman's (1988) theory further distinguishes between bonding social capital, which arises from close-knit relationships among members who already share similar backgrounds and values, and bridging social capital, which arises from connections across more diverse or hierarchically distant groups, such as between principals and teachers. Both forms are relevant to the SJKT context. Bonding social capital is likely to be relatively strong among SJKT teaching staff, who typically share Tamil language, cultural background, and a common experience of working within an historically under-resourced school type. Bridging social capital, by contrast, depends heavily on the principal's willingness and capacity to cultivate trust-based, reciprocal relationships across the formal authority gap that separates leadership from teaching staff. Where principals fail to build this bridging capital, even a cohesive teaching staff with strong internal bonds may experience a fragmented or mistrustful overall school climate, since the norms of reciprocity that sustain positive climate depend on connection across, not only within, organisational levels.

Principals' Leadership Styles and School Climate

The relationship between principal leadership and school climate has been extensively documented, with consistent evidence that leadership behaviours, values, and interpersonal approaches shape the organisational environment teachers experience every day (Fang & Qi, 2023; Hoque & Raya, 2023; Peng & Nair, 2022). The four leadership styles selected, namely transformational, autocratic, democratic, and empowering, represent a theoretically diverse and empirically well-supported spectrum that collectively captures the range of approaches most likely to be encountered in Malaysian Tamil schools (Bwalya, 2023; Shi et al., 2024).

Transformational leadership has consistently emerged as the style most conducive to positive school climate formation. Transformational principals who articulate a compelling vision and model inclusive professional values generate environments characterised by higher teacher engagement, stronger collegial bonds, and more open institutional communication (Meng, 2022). Sagathevan and Mohd Izham (2022), in a study conducted specifically within SJKT schools in Kuala Lumpur, confirmed that transformational leadership practices among headmasters were positively associated with teachers' job satisfaction, offering direct evidence from the Tamil vernacular school context that this leadership style shapes valued teacher outcomes. Despite the overall consistency of these findings, the relationship between transformational leadership and school climate is moderated by institutional context. In resource-poor settings such as SJKT schools, the effects of transformational leadership on school climate may be attenuated when structural constraints limit the principal's ability to deliver on aspirational commitments.

Autocratic leadership has been associated with negative school climate outcomes across diverse educational settings. Nguyen et al.'s (2024) systematic review of 355 studies on school leadership similarly found that controlling leadership practices, characterised by disrespecting teachers' professional autonomy and offering critical rather than constructive feedback, were consistently associated with reduced teacher job satisfaction and well-being, in contrast to autonomy-supportive practices that granted teachers professional freedom and voice. However, in culturally hierarchical contexts, principals who provide clear direction may still contribute to an organised and structured school environment, suggesting that the relationship between autocratic leadership and school climate is context-dependent.

Democratic leadership is strongly associated with positive school climate outcomes, particularly in relation to teacher participation, professional trust, and collegial engagement. Fang and Qi (2023) identified the decision-making sharing climate as a critical dimension of school climate, noting that when school leaders shift from top-down authoritative management to bottom-up democratic participation, school climate improves substantially. Hoque and Raya (2023) similarly found that, among four leadership styles examined in Malaysian schools, democratic leadership showed the strongest and most consistent association with positive teacher behaviour, explaining up to 32 percent of the variation in teachers' emotional

responsiveness, with democratically led teachers reporting more positive psychological and emotional engagement than their counterparts under instructional, transformational, or laissez-faire leadership.

Empowering leadership further strengthens school climate by enhancing teachers' sense of professional agency and self-efficacy, generating an institutional environment in which staff feel confident, valued, and collectively invested in the school's mission (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Bwalya (2023), in a conceptual review of leadership styles, similarly characterised democratic and participative approaches as producing higher employee engagement, stronger team cohesion, and more collaborative problem-solving by involving followers meaningfully in decision-making, features closely aligned with the empowering leadership construct. In SJKT schools, where historical underfunding has left lasting gaps in professional support infrastructure, empowering leadership takes on heightened significance as a mechanism for rebuilding teacher confidence and cultivating institutional trust.

Taken together, the literature reviewed across the four leadership styles reveals a consistent underlying pattern: leadership approaches that distribute agency, voice, and professional trust toward teachers, namely transformational, democratic, and empowering leadership, tend to be associated with more positive school climate outcomes, while leadership approaches that concentrate authority and limit teacher input, namely autocratic leadership, tend to show weaker or more context-dependent associations. However, the literature also cautions against treating these relationships as universal or context-free. Nearly all of the empirical evidence reviewed above was generated in settings that differ from SJKT schools in resourcing, cultural composition, or institutional history, meaning that the relative strength of each leadership style's association with school climate cannot simply be assumed to transfer to the Tamil vernacular school context. This underscores the value of the present study's direct empirical test of all four leadership styles within SJKT schools specifically, rather than relying on extrapolation from studies conducted elsewhere.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. This approach is appropriate when the researcher aims to document and analyse phenomena within their natural setting without experimental manipulation (Khanday & Khanam, 2019). A cross-sectional design was selected because data were collected at a single point in time, which is appropriate for examining correlational and predictive relationships between the study variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). While this design does not permit causal inference, it is widely used in educational leadership research for examining the strength and direction of relationships between leadership styles and institutional outcomes (Parveen et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024; Fang & Qi, 2023).

The cross-sectional survey design was further favored over alternative approaches, such as longitudinal or experimental designs, on practical as well as methodological grounds. A longitudinal design, while capable of establishing temporal precedence and thereby offering stronger grounds for causal inference, would have required data collection across multiple time points, substantially increasing the resource demands of the study and the risk of participant attrition across the five states involved. An experimental design, meanwhile, was not feasible given that leadership style is a naturally occurring characteristic of each school's existing principal and cannot ethically or practically be manipulated or randomly assigned for research purposes. Against this backdrop, a cross-sectional design offered the most efficient means of capturing a large, geographically representative sample within the resource and time constraints of the study, while still permitting robust statistical testing of the strength and direction of association between leadership styles and school climate.

Population and Sample

The target population of this study consists of all teaching staff currently employed in Malaysian Tamil primary schools (SJKT) across West Malaysia. According to data from the Kementerian Pendidikan

Malaysia, there are 528 SJKT schools in West Malaysia, employing 8,707 teachers. The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, which indicated a minimum sample of 368 for a population of 8,707. The researcher selected 400 teachers as the sample, exceeding the minimum requirement and thereby strengthening the statistical power and generalisability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Using a proportionate stratified random sampling technique, 400 Tamil Primary school teachers from five states in West Malaysia, namely Perak, Selangor, Johor, Pahang, and Penang, were selected. Eight schools were randomly selected from each state, and from each selected school, 10 teachers were invited to participate, yielding 80 respondents per state and a combined total of 400 respondents.

Research Instruments

This study employed a structured self-administered questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section collected teachers' demographic information. The second section comprised 34 items on principals' leadership styles, with transformational leadership measured by 8 items, autocratic leadership by 8 items, democratic leadership by 8 items, and empowering leadership by 10 items. The third section comprised 15 items on school climate, adopted from the New Jersey School Climate Survey (NJSCS), developed by the New Jersey Department of Education (n.d.). All items used a 5-point Likert scale. Items for transformational leadership were adopted from a questionnaire by Clark (2011), while items for autocratic, democratic, and empowering leadership were adopted from Stellar Leadership (n.d.).

Pilot Study and Reliability

A pilot study was conducted with 40 SJKT teachers from Perak prior to the main data collection to confirm the reliability and validity of the instruments. Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.708 to 0.948 across all constructs, confirming acceptable to excellent reliability. Content validity was established through an expert panel review, and construct validity was confirmed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis, with all factor loadings exceeding the 0.40 threshold (Hair et al., 2010). The pilot sample was excluded from the main study analysis.

Prior to conducting the substantive Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses, the data were screened to confirm that the statistical assumptions underlying these techniques were satisfied. Normality of the residuals was assessed through inspection of skewness and kurtosis statistics, and linearity of the relationships between predictor and outcome variables was examined using scatterplot inspection. Multicollinearity among the four leadership style predictors was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance statistics, ensuring that the four leadership dimensions, despite being conceptually related, retained sufficient statistical independence to be entered simultaneously into the regression model. Cases with missing data were reviewed, and no cases required exclusion on this basis. These preliminary diagnostic procedures confirmed that the dataset met the assumptions required for the parametric analyses subsequently reported in this study.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to standard ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics review process, and permission to approach SJKT schools was sought from the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the respective State Education Departments. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary; teachers were informed of the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to questionnaire administration.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process: no personally identifying information was collected on the questionnaire, and all data were coded and stored securely, accessible only to the researcher. Participants were assured that their individual responses would not be shared with school administrators and

that all findings would be reported only in aggregate form, ensuring that no individual teacher or principal could be identified from the results. These measures were designed to protect participants from any risk of professional repercussion and to encourage candid, accurate responses regarding sensitive topics such as their perceptions of principal leadership.

RESULTS

The quantitative data were analysed using Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis via IBM SPSS version 27.

RQ1: Overall Leadership Styles and School Climate

Is there a significant relationship between principals' overall leadership styles and school climate in Tamil Primary schools in West Malaysia?

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Between Principals' Overall Leadership Styles and School Climate

	Principals' Overall Leadership Styles	School Climate
Principals' Overall Leadership Styles	1	.555**
School Climate	.555**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Note. The level of significance is at $p < 0.05$

Results of the Pearson correlation indicate that there is a significant moderate positive relationship between principals' leadership styles and school climate ($r = .555$, $p = .000$). These findings indicate that when principals demonstrate more effective leadership behaviours, teachers perceive a more positive school climate. The results answer Research Question 1.

RQ2: Individual Leadership Styles and School Climate

Is there a significant relationship between principals' leadership styles (transformational leadership, autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, and empowering leadership) and school climate?

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Between Each Dimension of Principals' Overall Leadership Styles and School Climate

	Transformational	Autocratic	Democratic	Empowering
School Climate Pearson Correlation	.404**	.294**	.477**	.568**
Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0	0	0
N	400	400	400	400

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Note. The level of significance is at $p < 0.05$

The multiple correlation results presented in Table 2 demonstrate that all four leadership styles are significantly and positively related to school climate. Empowering leadership recorded the strongest correlation ($r = .568$, $p < .001$), indicating a moderate positive relationship, followed by democratic leadership ($r = .477$, $p < .001$), transformational leadership ($r = .404$, $p < .001$), and autocratic leadership ($r = .294$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that empowering and democratic leadership have the strongest associations with school climate, while autocratic leadership demonstrates the weakest, though still significant, relationship. These results answer Research Question 2.

RQ3: Impact of Leadership Styles on School Climate

Do principals' leadership styles significantly impact school climate in Tamil Primary schools in West Malaysia?

Table 3: Model Summary of Multiple Regression for Principals' Leadership Styles on School Climate.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
1	.616 ^a	.379	.373	.30791

a. Predictors: (Constant), Empowering Leadership, Autocratic Leadership, Democratic Leadership, Transformational Leadership. Note. The level of significance is at $p < 0.05$.

Table 3 shows that the multiple regression model accounted for a moderate proportion of variance in school climate ($R = .616$, $R^2 = .379$, Adjusted $R^2 = .373$). This indicates that the four dimensions of principals' leadership styles collectively explained 37.9% of the variance in school climate.

Table 4: ANOVA Results for Multiple Regression of Principals' Leadership Styles on School Climate

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	22.899	4	5.725	60.382	.000 ^b
Residual	37.450	395	.095		
Total	60.350	399			

a. Dependent Variable: School Climate. b. Predictors: (Constant), Empowering Leadership, Autocratic Leadership, Democratic Leadership, Transformational Leadership. Note. The level of significance is at $p < 0.05$

The ANOVA results in Table 4 confirm that the four leadership styles as a combined set significantly predict school climate ($F(4, 395) = 60.382$, $p < .001$).

Table 5: Regression Coefficients of Principals' Leadership Styles on School Climate

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.191	.187		6.374	.000
Transformational Leadership	-.052	.047	-.063	-1.100	.272
Autocratic Leadership	.115	.032	.156	3.561	.000
Democratic Leadership	.197	.057	.191	3.465	.001
Empowering Leadership	.466	.052	.472	8.919	.000

As presented in Table 5, three out of four leadership styles significantly impacted school climate. Empowering leadership was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .472$, $p < .001$), followed by democratic leadership ($\beta = .191$, $p < .001$), and autocratic leadership ($\beta = .156$, $p < .001$), Transformational leadership did not significantly impact school climate ($\beta = -.063$, $p = .272$). These findings answer Research Question 3.

Taken together, the results in Tables 1 through 5 provide a consistent statistical picture across all three research questions. Principals' leadership styles, considered collectively, show a significant moderate positive association with school climate; each of the four individual leadership dimensions shows a significant positive bivariate correlation with school climate, though of varying strength; and when entered simultaneously into a multiple regression model, three of the four leadership styles retain independent predictive value for school climate, jointly explaining just over one-third of the variance observed. The convergence of these three analytical approaches, correlation at the composite level, correlation at the dimension level, and multivariate regression, strengthens confidence that the observed relationships between leadership style and school climate in SJKT schools are not an artefact of any single statistical technique.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirmed that there is a significant moderate positive relationship between principals' overall leadership styles and school climate in SJKT schools in West Malaysia ($r = .555$, $p < .001$). This means that when teachers perceive their principals as demonstrating effective leadership behaviours across all four dimensions, they also rate their overall school climate more positively. This result is consistent with findings by Fang and Qi (2023), who demonstrated that principal leadership behaviour is a significant predictor of school climate quality, and by Hoque and Raya (2023), who found that empowering leadership had a particularly strong effect on school climate by building the shared professional norms and collegial trust that define a positive institutional environment.

The regression analysis revealed that empowering leadership contributes the most to school climate ($\beta = .472$, $p < .001$), followed by democratic leadership ($\beta = .191$, $p < .001$) and autocratic leadership ($\beta = .156$, $p < .001$). Empowering principals create institutional conditions where teachers feel confident, professionally valued, and collectively invested in the school, which explains why this style produces the strongest school climate. This aligns with Bwalya's (2023) conceptual account of participative and empowering leadership, which similarly describes how granting followers autonomy and decision-making authority builds trust, collaboration, and a stronger sense of collective ownership within an organisation. Ofubaraibim and Jaja (2025) further noted that the concrete empowerment of teachers through participatory decision-making produces the deepest institutional improvements, as teachers consistently identify professional ownership and involvement in school decisions as stronger contributors to a positive climate than inspirational vision alone.

The finding that democratic leadership is the second strongest predictor of school climate is consistent with Fang and Qi (2023), who showed that democratic leadership significantly improves school climate through its creation of participatory institutional norms and open communication structures. When teachers are afforded genuine voice and meaningful participation in school decision-making, the resulting sense of institutional ownership generates a more open and professionally engaged school climate. This finding is particularly relevant for SJKT schools, where building shared governance structures that include Tamil community stakeholders and teachers in institutional decisions can produce durable improvements in school climate quality.

The finding that autocratic leadership also significantly predicts school climate, though as the weakest predictor ($\beta = .156$), is somewhat unexpected given the literature's general association between autocratic leadership and negative climate outcomes. However, this finding suggests that in the SJKT context, where institutional stability and clear direction from the principal may be perceived as a form of professional security, some degree of structured directive leadership may contribute positively to an ordered school environment.

Transformational leadership did not emerge as a significant independent predictor of school climate when all four styles were entered simultaneously ($\beta = -.063$, $p = .272$). This does not mean transformational leadership has no value for school climate. Rather, in the SJKT context, the specific mechanisms through which empowering and democratic leadership shape climate are more directly captured by these two styles, while transformational leadership shares considerable variance with them. When all four styles are entered

together, the unique contribution of transformational leadership to school climate is absorbed by the overlapping effects of empowering and democratic leadership (Sagathevan & Mohd Izham, 2022).

This pattern of findings, in which empowering and democratic leadership emerge as the strongest predictors while transformational leadership's unique contribution is statistically absorbed, has an important practical implication that extends beyond the specific statistical result. It suggests that, at least in the SJKT context, the value of transformational leadership for school climate may operate primarily through its overlap with empowering and democratic behaviours, such as delegating authority and involving teachers in decisions, rather than through the more inspirational or visionary elements that are sometimes treated as the defining feature of transformational leadership in the broader literature. For SJKT principals with limited time and resources for leadership development, this suggests that training investments may generate greater returns on school climate when they concentrate specifically on empowerment and participatory decision-making skills rather than on broader visionary or charismatic leadership competencies that are more difficult to develop and whose distinct contribution, once empowering and democratic behaviours are accounted for, appears comparatively limited in this context.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals important findings in the context of Tamil Primary schools in West Malaysia. First, all four principal leadership styles are significantly and positively associated with school climate, with empowering leadership demonstrating the strongest relationship, followed by democratic leadership, transformational leadership, and autocratic leadership. Second, the regression analysis confirms that three of the four leadership styles, namely empowering, democratic, and autocratic leadership, are significant independent predictors of school climate, collectively explaining 37.9% of its variance.

These findings have theoretical, practical, and pedagogical implications. In terms of theoretical implications, the current findings support Tagiuri and Litwin's (1968) Organisational Climate Theory and Coleman's (1988) Social Capital Theory in the SJKT context, demonstrating that principal leadership shapes school climate through the relational networks and institutional norms that determine teachers' collective experience of the school environment. In terms of practical implications, the Malaysian Ministry of Education and Tamil school management should provide leadership training to SJKT principals that specifically develops empowering and democratic leadership competencies, as these two styles produce the strongest school climate outcomes. Generic leadership training that does not account for the unique institutional context of Tamil primary schools is unlikely to produce the targeted improvements in school climate that the findings recommend.

Beyond leadership training specifically, the findings also point to the value of embedding empowerment and shared decision-making structures into the formal governance arrangements of SJKT schools, rather than relying solely on individual principals' discretionary leadership style. Establishing standing teacher consultation committees, formalising channels for teacher input into school-level decisions, and building distributed leadership roles for experienced teachers would help institutionalise the participatory practices this study identifies as most strongly associated with positive school climate, ensuring that improvements in school climate are not solely dependent on the tenure of any single principal but are instead embedded within the school's ongoing organisational structure.

This study has several limitations. First, only quantitative data were collected. Future researchers may consider mixed-methods approaches to gain deeper insights into how specific principal behaviours shape school climate in the Tamil school context. Second, the study focused solely on West Malaysian SJKT schools. Comparative research involving other school types in Malaysia would clarify whether the patterns found here are specific to the Tamil school context or more broadly applicable. Third, the cross-sectional design means that causal relationships cannot be established. Longitudinal studies that track changes in principal leadership style and school climate over time would provide stronger evidence for the directional relationships proposed in this study.

Fourth, the study relied on teacher self-report to measure both principal leadership style and school climate. While this is standard practice in the field and consistent with most of the studies cited throughout this article, it introduces the possibility of common method bias, whereby relationships between variables may be inflated because both are measured through the same reporting source at the same point in time. Future studies could strengthen the validity of findings by incorporating principal self-ratings, independent observational assessment of leadership behaviours, or objective school-level indicators of climate alongside teacher self-report.

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