

# Perspectives on Principal Leadership Capacities: Evidence from Secondary Schools in Sri Lanka

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership capacities in secondary schools within the Galle Educational Division, Sri Lanka. Grounded in transformational and distributed leadership theories, the research explored how teachers evaluated their principals' competencies across five dimensions: shared vision for high student achievement, instructional leadership, staff professional development and guidance, personal leadership qualities, and systems and resource management. A descriptive survey design was employed, involving 85 teachers randomly selected from ten schools representing diverse contexts. Data were collected using a self-structured questionnaire and analyzed primarily through descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests to identify variations in perceptions across demographic factors such as gender and age. Findings revealed that teachers generally perceived principals positively in personal leadership qualities and shared vision, while comparatively lower ratings were observed in areas related to staff professional development and instructional leadership. Gender-based analysis indicated minor perceptual differences, with female teachers showing slightly higher levels of satisfaction with leadership practices. The study highlights the contextual and relational nature of effective school leadership within Sri Lanka's centralized education system. It concludes that developing principals' instructional and mentoring capacities through targeted professional development programs is critical for enhancing school effectiveness. The findings contribute empirical insights to the limited body of research on educational leadership in South Asian contexts and inform leadership training and policy reforms in Sri Lanka.

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## 1. Introduction

Effective school leadership is widely recognized as a key determinant of student achievement, second only to classroom instruction (Leithwood et al., 2008; Shen & Wu, 2024). Recent meta-analytic evidence confirms that principal leadership exerts a moderate but significant effect on student outcomes ( $d = 0.34$ ), though its impact varies

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across educational contexts (Shen & Wu, 2024). Principals influence teaching and learning by setting a clear vision, developing human capital, managing instructional programs, and fostering school improvement (Hallinger, 2011; Pashmforoosh et al., 2023). Importantly, teachers' perceptions of these practices mediate how leadership transforms into school performance (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998; Price & Olsen, 2023).

Sri Lanka's secondary education system serves over 2.3 million students in nearly 10,000 schools, achieving one of South Asia's highest literacy rates (92%) (Ministry of Education, 2020; Aturupane & Little, 2020). Within this highly centralized structure, principals are responsible for ensuring instructional quality and maintaining school operations. However, appointments are typically based on seniority rather than demonstrated leadership competence, and structured training opportunities remain limited (Jayasuriya & Semasinghe, 2015). Recent capacity development efforts by UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO, 2025) have begun addressing these gaps, yet challenges persist amid low education expenditure only 1.83% of GDP, among the world's lowest (Daily FT, 2024).

Much of the educational leadership literature originates in Western contexts, with limited representation from South Asia (Hallinger & Chen, 2015). South Asian systems, including Sri Lanka's, are shaped by hierarchical authority, collectivist values, and colonial legacies (Walker & Dimmock, 2002; Aturupane & Little, 2020). These cultural features often lead to leadership practices distinct from those in Western societies, suggesting that global models require contextual adaptation to reflect local realities.

Understanding how teachers perceive principals' leadership capacities is therefore critical. Teachers are the principal's closest collaborators, and their perceptions strongly influence motivation, professional commitment, and instructional improvement (Blasé & Blasé, 2009; Scallon et al., 2023). Recent studies show that principals who recognize teachers' expertise, communicate clear visions, and prioritize student learning foster higher satisfaction and retention (Scallon et al., 2023). Moreover, perception-based studies reveal the lived experience of leadership in schools rather than idealized models (Hallinger, 2011; Moreno, 2023). Research consistently finds perceptual gaps between principals and teachers, with principals rating their own leadership more favorably (Price & Olsen, 2023; Tosh & Doss, 2020) a dynamic that has implications for school improvement.

Educational leadership is also central to national development, particularly in contexts striving to strengthen human capital (Mulford, 2003). In Sri Lanka, principals are expected to serve as instructional leaders who nurture professional learning, sustain teaching quality, and build positive school cultures (Leithwood, 2004; Pashmforoosh et al., 2023). Their effectiveness depends not only on administrative efficiency but also on trust, communication, and support for teacher growth (Dissanayake, 1988; Johns, 2011). Given that leadership impact is relational (Bhindi, 2003), and that self-other perception gaps can weaken school outcomes (Tosh & Doss, 2020), examining teacher perceptions is vital for strengthening leadership practice and policy in Sri Lanka's resource-constrained education system.

## **2. Research gap statement**

Although international research underscores the importance of principal leadership in shaping school success, empirical evidence from Sri Lanka remains scarce. The Sri Lankan education system operates under unique structural and cultural conditions such as high centralization, limited school autonomy, bureaucratic appointments, and resource constraints that differentiate it from Western and even regional counterparts.

The New Education Act for General Education (2009) designates principals as the primary administrative and instructional leaders responsible for promoting effective teaching and learning. Yet, principal appointments continue to emphasize seniority over leadership preparation (Arikewuyo & Onanuga, 2005), leading to potential skill gaps. Recent capacity development initiatives supported by UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (2025) indicate ongoing efforts to address these gaps, particularly following the wave of retirements among senior education officials that left critical capacity shortfalls. However, it remains unclear how teachers perceive

principals' leadership capacities within these systemic constraints, which leadership dimensions are most valued, and whether gender influences these perceptions.

Moreover, contemporary research emphasizes substantial variation in leadership effectiveness across cultural and developmental contexts, with recent large-scale cross-cultural studies revealing that the relationship between instructional leadership and student achievement varies significantly based on human development levels and cultural factors (Pietsch et al., 2023). These findings underscore the critical need for context-specific research in South Asian educational systems. By addressing these questions, this study fills a critical empirical void in Sri Lankan educational leadership research. It applies transformational and distributed leadership perspectives to analyze teacher perceptions across five leadership dimensions, considering gender and age as moderating factors. The findings aim to generate contextually relevant evidence to guide principal training, inform educational policy, and strengthen school leadership practices. Ultimately, this research seeks to support Sri Lanka's broader educational reform goals by promoting more effective, inclusive, and professional school leadership.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine teachers' perceptions of principal leadership capacities in secondary schools in Sri Lanka. Its specific objectives are to:

- find out how teachers perceive their principals' leadership capacity within school contexts.
- examine gender-based differences in teachers' perceptions across leadership dimensions.
- explore teachers' views of principals' shared vision, instructional leadership, staff development, personal leadership qualities, and systems management.
- Find out dimensions of leadership capacity requiring further development.

By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to the growing body of research on educational leadership in South Asia and offers practical insights for enhancing principal preparation and leadership effectiveness in Sri Lankan schools.

### **3. Literature review**

#### **3.1. Conceptualizing Principal Leadership Capacity**

The concept of leadership capacity in education has evolved from emphasizing administrative efficiency to recognizing the principal as a multifaceted leader who inspires, manages, and transforms schools (Eastman, 2013). Stogdill's (1950) seminal definition of leadership as "the process of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement" (p. 13) remains foundational. Subsequent scholars, such as Tannenbaum (1961), expanded this view to include interpersonal influence, shared vision, and the balancing of stakeholder interests.

Within educational settings, principal leadership capacity refers to the skills, experiences, and motivations that enable effective school leadership. Eastman (2013) conceptualized leadership capacity as comprising three interrelated elements: skills, experience, and motivation that expand or contract according to contextual demands. Effective principals demonstrate technical competence, emotional intelligence, and strategic decision-making, fostering teacher collaboration and student-centered school cultures (Leithwood, 2004; Hoerr, 2005; Mohan, 2014). Mohan (2014) further emphasized that successful principals exhibit optimism, confidence, and strong interpersonal skills. They engage constructively with teachers and students, manage discipline effectively, and build relationships within the wider community. Moreover, they possess interdisciplinary knowledge across psychology, philosophy, and the social sciences, and remain abreast of pedagogical and technological advances. Leadership capacity, therefore, extends beyond positional authority to encompass moral commitment, interpersonal competence, and systemic understanding.

### 3.2. Teacher Perceptions as Indicators of Leadership Effectiveness

Teacher perceptions provide a critical lens through which leadership effectiveness can be understood. Unlike external performance metrics, teacher perspectives capture how leadership is enacted and experienced in everyday school life (Blasé, 2009; Moreno, 2023). Positive perceptions of principals correlate with higher levels of teacher morale, motivation, professional commitment, and instructional quality (Hargreaves, 2000; Scallon et al., 2023).

Trust forms the cornerstone of positive teacher perceptions. As Hoerr (2005) notes, "a principal must earn trust from her teachers" (p. 89). Mutual trust enhances professional efficacy, autonomy, and satisfaction. Recent research confirms that principals who recognize teachers as knowledgeable contributors, clearly communicate the school's vision, and center student learning directly influence teacher retention and satisfaction (Scallon et al., 2023). Conversely, negative leadership behaviors such as inconsistency, excessive criticism, or lack of support diminish morale and foster resistance (Blasé, 2009). Leithwood (2004) identified organizational factors influenced by leadership, including job satisfaction, collegial trust, professionalism, shared influence, and collaboration opportunities all of which mediate the effects of leadership on teaching and learning.

Johnson (1998) found that constructive interactions between leaders and teachers promote cooperative planning and professional growth, whereas destructive interactions lead to isolation and disengagement. Notably, research demonstrates substantial perceptual gaps between principals and teachers regarding leadership effectiveness, with principals consistently rating their own performance more positively than teachers do (Price & Olsen, 2023; Tosh & Doss, 2020). These perceptual discrepancies have significant implications for school climate and organizational outcomes. Accordingly, teacher perceptions serve not only as evaluations of leadership performance but also as predictors of school climate and instructional quality.

### 3.3. Principal Leadership and School Effectiveness

Extensive research over the past four decades confirms that school leadership significantly influences student achievement, primarily by shaping teacher performance and organizational conditions (Hallinger, 2011; Shen & Wu, 2024). Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) synthesized international evidence into seven claims, the most notable of which established leadership as second only to classroom teaching in its impact on student learning. Recent meta-analytical research confirms this relationship, demonstrating that principal leadership has a statistically significant positive relationship with student achievement with a moderate effect size ( $d = 0.34$ ), though effect magnitudes vary substantially across educational contexts (Shen & Wu, 2024). Leadership effects are largely indirect, mediated through teachers' motivation, capacity, and work environments.

Robinson, *et al.* (2008) meta-analysis of 27 studies demonstrated that instructional leadership ( $d = 0.42$ ) exerts a stronger effect on student outcomes than transformational leadership ( $d = 0.11$ ). However, more recent large-scale cross-cultural research reveals greater complexity, with Pietsch et al. (2023) analyzing data from 1.5 million students across 75 countries finding that the mean correlation between instructional leadership and student achievement approaches zero, with substantial variation across contexts driven primarily by levels of human development and cultural factors. Similarly, Tan et al. (2024) conducted a three-level meta-analysis of 493 effects from 108 studies, finding an overall small effect size ( $r = 0.14$ ), with effect sizes for specific leadership practices ranging from  $r = 0.10$  to  $0.26$ . These findings underscore the importance of context-sensitive leadership models, given the Western dominance in leadership research and the substantial variation in effect sizes across different cultural and developmental contexts (Hallinger, 2018; Pietsch et al., 2023). Collectively, these findings emphasize that principals influence school effectiveness most powerfully through the instructional and relational climate they cultivate, though the magnitude of these effects depends significantly on contextual factors.

### **3.4. Dimensions of Principal Leadership Capacity**

Principal leadership encompasses instructional, organizational, and relational domains. Drawing from existing literature and aligned with this study's third objective, five key dimensions of leadership capacity are identified and discussed below.

#### **3.4.1. Shared Vision for High Student Achievement**

Visionary leadership involves articulating and sustaining a collective commitment to student success (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Day et al., 2016). Effective principals inspire shared purpose, align teacher efforts with institutional goals, and encourage innovation. Recent research on transformational leadership in primary schools demonstrates that such leadership positively impacts staff motivation and school culture, with transformational leaders inspiring teachers to achieve more and become more committed to organizational missions (O'Sullivan & Lafferty, 2024). In centralized education systems such as Sri Lanka's, this requires balancing national policy mandates with local needs, fostering teacher ownership, and upholding high academic expectations.

#### **3.4.2. Instructional Leadership**

Instructional leadership represents the most direct avenue through which principals influence student learning (Hallinger, 2011). It includes curriculum coordination, classroom supervision, feedback provision, and data-driven school improvement (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). A recent meta-analytical structural equation modeling study examining 60 studies with over 36,000 participants found that instructional leadership, along with transformational and distributed leadership, significantly affects teacher performance, which in turn directly influences student achievement (Kılınc et al., 2024). However, the effectiveness of instructional leadership varies substantially across cultural contexts and levels of economic development (Pietsch et al., 2023). In developing contexts, principals' instructional engagement is often constrained by administrative burdens and limited autonomy (Hallinger & Chen, 2015).

#### **3.4.3. Professional Development and Guidance of Staff**

Principals build school capacity by fostering teacher learning and collaboration (Youngs & King, 2002). Leadership that promotes professional development correlates with teacher satisfaction and improved instructional quality (Leithwood, 2004). Recent research emphasizes the effectiveness of virtual professional leadership learning communities in building school leaders' instructional capacity, demonstrating that collaborative learning structures significantly enhance leadership development (Pashmforoosh et al., 2023). In Sri Lanka, formal opportunities for professional development remain scarce; hence, principals' active mentoring and facilitation of peer learning are vital to sustaining teaching quality.

#### **3.4.4. Personal Leadership Qualities**

Personal attributes such as empathy, integrity, and effective communication are essential to relational trust and a positive school culture (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Principals with high emotional intelligence resolve conflict constructively, motivate teachers, and promote well-being (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). In collectivist contexts such as Sri Lanka, where interpersonal relationships strongly shape workplace harmony, personal leadership exerts a pronounced influence on teacher cooperation and morale (Walker & Dimmock, 2002).

#### **3.4.5. Management of Systems, Operations, and Resources**

Sound management practices underpin effective school functioning. Principals must administer human, financial, and physical resources efficiently while ensuring compliance with policy directives (Bush & Glover, 2016). Though often perceived as technical, efficient management provides the organizational stability and resource base necessary for instructional improvement (Hallinger, 2011). Collectively, these five dimensions form the conceptual framework guiding this study's analysis of teachers' perceptions of principal leadership capacity.

### **3.5. Gender and Leadership Perceptions**

Leadership behaviors and perceptions are often influenced by gender norms. Research suggests that male and female principals frequently display different leadership styles shaped by societal expectations and institutional cultures (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Female principals tend to adopt more collaborative and people-oriented approaches, while male principals are often characterized by task orientation and authority (Judge et al., 2004).

In schools, these differences shape teacher perceptions: teachers often view female principals as more empathetic and supportive, contributing to higher morale and relational cohesion (Peiris & Smith, 2008). However, recent research reveals persistent gender-based challenges in educational leadership. A 2024 survey of over 110 women in senior education leadership roles across 28 U.S. states found that 82% reported external pressure to dress, speak, or behave differently because of their gender, with women of color experiencing even greater pressure (Women Leading Ed, 2024). The study also found that 95% believed they had to make professional sacrifices that male colleagues did not, and 57% reported being overlooked for advancement opportunities given to male colleagues. Additionally, in patriarchal or hierarchical societies, female leaders may face bias that influences how their leadership is evaluated (Walker & Dimmock, 2006). Understanding these gender-based variations is therefore vital to promoting equitable leadership practices a focus directly aligned with the second objective of this study.

### **3.6. Identifying Areas for Leadership Development**

Globally, leadership development programs have evolved to strengthen competencies in vision building, instructional guidance, and teacher empowerment (Leithwood, 2004; Hallinger, 2018). Recent trends emphasize the need for adaptive, context-responsive leadership that can navigate complex organizational changes and transformations (Lafferty et al., 2024). Effective principals continually refine their leadership through reflection, feedback, and professional learning. In Sri Lanka, however, principal training remains predominantly administrative, with limited emphasis on pedagogical leadership or emotional intelligence (Jayasuriya & Semasinghe, 2015).

## **4. Theoretical framework and variable justification**

This study is grounded in transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) and distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2006), both of which emphasize the relational and collaborative nature of school leadership. Transformational leadership posits that effective leaders inspire and motivate followers through shared vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence (Bass, 1985; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Recent systematic reviews of transformational school leadership in primary schools confirm its positive impact on staff motivation and school culture, with strong interconnections between transformational leadership practices and enhanced organizational outcomes (O'Sullivan & Lafferty, 2024). This theoretical foundation is particularly relevant in resource-constrained educational contexts, where intrinsic motivation and professional collaboration are essential for sustaining teacher engagement and instructional improvement.

Distributed leadership theory complements transformational leadership by conceptualizing leadership as a collective endeavor involving multiple stakeholders rather than the responsibility of a single individual (Spillane, 2006; Mailu, 2024). Recent research demonstrates that distributed leadership models enhance school climate, student engagement, and academic achievement by enabling flexibility in organizational structures, facilitating digital collaboration, and promoting shared vision and distributed decision-making (Mailu, 2024; Tran et al., 2022). In high-needs schools, distributed and transformational leadership teams have been shown to improve working conditions and student learning by clarifying expectations, enhancing communication, and providing professional development support (Tran et al., 2022). The integration of both theoretical frameworks acknowledges that effective school leadership in contemporary contexts requires both inspirational vision-setting and collaborative capacity-building.

The inclusion of gender as a key variable draws on gendered leadership theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and social role theory, which suggest that leadership effectiveness is shaped by alignment between gender roles and leadership expectations. Evidence indicates that female leaders often adopt more transformational and participative

styles—emphasizing empathy, relationship-building, and shared decision-making (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2010) which may be particularly effective in education. However, contemporary research reveals persistent gender bias in educational leadership, with women experiencing pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, being overlooked for advancement opportunities, and facing disproportionate professional sacrifices compared to male colleagues (Women Leading Ed, 2024). In Sri Lanka's male-dominated leadership culture, female principals may face distinct challenges and expectations that shape teacher perceptions differently.

Age is another relevant demographic factor, theoretically grounded in career stage theory and adult development theory (Knowles, 1984; Ng & Feldman, 2010). Teachers at different career stages hold varying expectations of leadership: early-career teachers tend to be idealistic, mid-career teachers (typically aged 41–50) possess experience across diverse contexts and can provide more balanced evaluations, while late-career teachers may show reduced organizational commitment (Van Houtte, 2006). Understanding these age-based perception differences allows for more adaptive and differentiated leadership practices.

Accordingly, this study examines teachers' perceptions of principal leadership capacities across five key dimensions identified in the literature:

- (a) Shared vision for high student achievement
- (b) Instructional leadership
- (c) Professional development and guidance of staff
- (d) Personal leadership qualities
- (e) Systems and resource management

The study also explores how perceptions vary by gender and age of teachers and principals, thus situating leadership effectiveness within the interplay of individual, relational, and contextual factors.

## 5. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey design to examine teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership capacities in secondary schools. The research was carried out in the Galle Educational Division of Sri Lanka's Southern Province, which includes urban, semi-urban, and rural schools of varying sizes and performance levels, representing the educational diversity of the country.

The population comprised all secondary school teachers (Grades 9–13) in government schools within the division (N = 1,938). A two-stage stratified random sampling method was used to ensure representativeness. In the first stage, ten schools (two national and eight provincial) were selected to capture variation by school type, size, and location. In the second stage, ten teachers were randomly selected from each school, yielding a total of 100 participants. Of these, 85 valid responses were obtained (response rate: 85%), including 25 male and 60 female teachers, broadly consistent with national gender distributions.

Data were collected using a self-structured questionnaire developed from the literature and conceptual framework. It consisted of five dimensions of principal leadership capacity: shared vision for student achievement, instructional leadership, professional development and guidance, personal leadership qualities, and systems and resource management. Responses were recorded on a six-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1), with an additional option Not Observed (0). Content validity was ensured through expert review and pilot testing, resulting in minor refinements for clarity and contextual relevance.

The researcher personally visited each school, explained the study objectives, and guided participants to ensure accuracy and completeness in responses. Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential techniques. Descriptive statistics frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize teachers' perceptions across leadership dimensions. In addition, the Chi-square test was employed to examine associations between teachers' demographic characteristics (such as gender) and their perceptions of principals' leadership capacities.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant educational authorities, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were maintained throughout the process. Although the study was limited to one educational division and relied on self-reported, cross-sectional data thereby restricting generalizability it provides valuable insights into principal leadership capacities and teacher perceptions within the Sri Lankan secondary school context.

## 6. Data Analysis and Results

The analysis focused on understanding teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership capacity across five dimensions: shared vision, instructional leadership, professional development and guidance, personal leadership qualities, and systems and resource management. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize responses, while Chi-square tests examined associations between gender and perception levels.

### 6.1. Overall Teacher Perceptions of Principal Leadership

Teachers in secondary schools within the Galle Division generally held favorable views of their principals' leadership capacities. Across all five dimensions, 78% of teachers (n = 66) expressed positive perceptions (Strongly Agree or Agree), while 16.3% (n = 14) were neutral and only 5.7% (n = 5) disagreed. This indicates that, overall, principals were viewed as competent leaders who inspire confidence among their teaching staff.

### 6.2. Gender-Based Differences in Leadership Perceptions

#### 6.2.1. Perceptions Based on Principal Gender

A notable pattern emerged when comparing teacher perceptions of male and female principals. Teachers working under female principals (n = 34 across 4 schools) consistently provided higher ratings than those under male principals (n = 51 across 6 schools). On average, 85% of responses for female principals were positive compared to 74% for male principals. The differences were most evident in personal leadership qualities (87% vs. 73%), professional development support (86% vs. 72%), and instructional leadership (83% vs. 68%). These results suggest that female principals may demonstrate leadership styles emphasizing collaboration, empathy, and support traits that appear to align more closely with teachers' expectations in the Sri Lankan educational context.

#### 6.2.2. Perceptions Based on Teacher Gender

The Chi-square test was applied to examine whether male and female teachers differed significantly in their perceptions across leadership dimensions.

**Table 1**

*Chi-Square Results for Gender-Based Differences in Teacher Perceptions*

Leadership Dimension	$\chi^2$	df	p-value	Interpretation
Shared Vision	0.084	2	0.959	No significant difference
Instructional Leadership	1.045	2	0.593	No significant difference
Professional Development	0.755	2	0.685	No significant difference
Personal Leadership	0.366	2	0.833	No significant difference
Systems Management	0.044	2	0.978	No significant difference

A Chi-square test of independence revealed no statistically significant association between teacher gender and perceptions of leadership capacity across all dimensions ( $p > 0.05$ ). This indicates that male and female teachers generally share similar views about their principals' leadership performance.

**Table 2***Gender-Based Perception Patterns (Percentage Distribution)*

Leadership Dimension	Male Teachers (SA)	Male (A)	Male (N)	Female Teachers (SA)	Female (A)	Female (N)
Shared Vision	29	41	19	26	44	18
Instructional Leadership	35	50	12	29	42	20
Professional Development	21	55	23	27	47	19
Personal Leadership	33	50	16	38	44	14
Systems Management	37	50	11	35	51	11

*(SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral)*

Although not statistically significant, male teachers tended to provide more polarized responses—more in Strongly Agree and Neutral whereas female teachers’ responses clustered in Agree. This pattern aligns with prior studies suggesting that female teachers often use more moderate evaluative tones in rating school leadership (Fischer, 2018; Altalib, 2013).

### 6.2.3. Age-Related Differences in Leadership Perceptions

**Table 3***Positive Perception Percentages by Teacher Age Group*

Age Group	n	Strongly Agree + Agree (%)
Under 30	9	69
31–40	30	75
41–50	21	89
Over 50	25	73

Teachers aged 41–50 years recorded the most favorable perceptions (89%), suggesting that mid-career educators typically with extensive classroom experience and established professional relationships view principals more positively. In contrast, the lowest positive responses came from younger teachers (69%), possibly reflecting idealistic expectations or limited exposure to effective leadership practices. Teachers over 50 reported slightly reduced positivity (73%), possibly indicating greater critical scrutiny developed through long experience.

### 6.3. Dimension-Specific Findings

Among the five dimensions, Shared Vision received the highest positive rating (86.6%), indicating that principals effectively communicate school goals and inspire shared commitment to student achievement. Systems and Resource Management (82.3%) was another strong area, reflecting principals’ administrative competence in managing limited resources.

**Table 4***Teacher Perceptions by Leadership Dimension*

Leadership Dimension	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Combined Positive (%)
Shared Vision	35.5	51.1	11.0	1.3	0.6	86.6
Systems & Resource Management	36.5	45.8	14.2	0.8	0.5	82.3
Professional Development	30.6	44.5	17.6	1.3	1.6	75.1
Personal Leadership	24.8	49.6	20.0	2.3	1.3	74.4
Instructional Leadership	26.5	44.0	18.6	2.3	2.4	70.5

*(SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree)*

Conversely, Instructional Leadership scored the lowest (70.5%), highlighting a relative weakness in curriculum supervision, classroom observation, and pedagogical support. The higher neutral and disagreement rates suggest that many principals remain more focused on managerial tasks than on guiding instructional improvement.

Similarly, Professional Development Support (75.1%) and Personal Leadership Qualities (74.4%) were moderately positive, suggesting variability in principals' ability to mentor staff and maintain strong interpersonal relationships. The findings imply that leadership practices emphasizing human and pedagogical development require further strengthening in Sri Lankan schools.

#### 6.4. Areas Requiring Further Development

**Table 5**

*Lowest-Rated Leadership Practices*

<b>Leadership Practice</b>	<b>Agreement (%)</b>	<b>Mean Response</b>
Use and promote technology in school	58	3.52
Awareness of learners' diverse needs	62	3.61
Use community resources effectively	64	3.68
Deploy financial and human resources optimally	67	3.74
Systematic classroom observations	69	3.78
Support for differentiated instruction	70	3.82

The lowest-rated practices reveal critical areas for professional development. Technology integration (58%) was the weakest domain, underscoring ongoing challenges with digital infrastructure and principals' readiness for technology-enhanced leadership. Similarly, relatively low ratings for awareness of diverse learner needs (62%) and community engagement (64%) point to a need for more inclusive, outward-facing leadership. Weaknesses in systematic classroom observation and differentiated instructional support indicate limited emphasis on pedagogical mentoring.

Overall, while Sri Lankan principals demonstrate strong administrative and visionary capacities, the results highlight the importance of developing instructional and digital leadership skills to meet 21st-century educational demands.

#### 6.5. Overall Positive Perceptions: Contextual Interpretation

The finding that 78% of teachers perceived their principals' leadership positively aligns with transformational leadership theory, emphasizing trust and relationship-building as foundations of effective leadership (Bass, 1985; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). This contrasts with findings from other Asian contexts, such as Luo and Najjar (2007) in China, where perceptions were more moderate, suggesting that Sri Lankan principals have cultivated positive professional relationships despite systemic challenges.

Sri Lanka's collectivist culture and respect for authority (Hofstede, 2001) may partly explain the overall favorable evaluations; however, teachers' differentiated ratings across dimensions indicate thoughtful appraisal rather than deference. The distinction between high ratings for systems management (82.3%) and lower scores for instructional leadership (70.5%) demonstrates teachers' capacity for critical evaluation. Strong perceptions in personal leadership and systems management further suggest the presence of trust attributes such as competence, honesty, and benevolence (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998), which support effective school functioning.

#### 6.6. Gender and Leadership: Theoretical Implications

Female principals received higher ratings across all leadership dimensions, reflecting leadership behaviors consistent with transformational and collaborative models (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Judge et al., 2004). Their relational and participatory approaches appear to resonate strongly with teachers, reinforcing the view that gender diversity enhances leadership effectiveness in educational contexts (Hulpia, Devos, & Rosseel, 2009).

This finding also supports distributed leadership perspectives (Spillane, 2006), where inclusive decision-making promotes teacher engagement and commitment. The 11-percentage-point difference in positive ratings (85% vs. 74%) suggests a meaningful practical advantage. It highlights the need to encourage women's participation in

leadership roles, as their collaborative style aligns well with school cultures valuing teamwork and emotional intelligence. Similar trends observed in other Asian and African studies (Petzko, 2008; Moorosi, 2010) confirm the cross-cultural relevance of gendered leadership dynamics.

### **6.7. Age and Professional Experience: Developmental Perspectives**

Mid-career teachers (ages 41–50) showed the most positive perceptions (89%), compared to younger (69%) and older (73%) colleagues. This pattern aligns with career-stage theory (Knowles, 1984), suggesting that mid-career teachers combine professional maturity with active engagement in school improvement. Their broader experience enables balanced and realistic evaluations of leadership effectiveness.

Younger teachers may express lower satisfaction due to idealistic expectations or limited reference points, while late-career teachers may be more critical owing to reduced engagement or comparisons with earlier leadership experiences (Van Houtte, 2006). These results suggest principals should adopt differentiated leadership strategies providing mentoring for novices, collaborative roles for mid-career teachers, and recognition for veteran staff to sustain motivation and organizational harmony.

### **6.8. Dimensional Strengths and Weaknesses: Practical Implications**

#### **6.8.1. Systems Management Strength**

High ratings for systems and resource management (82.3%) reflect principals' administrative competence in maintaining organizational stability despite limited resources. This supports research emphasizing that sound management provides the foundation for instructional improvement (Bush & Glover, 2016). However, reliance on administrative efficiency alone may limit pedagogical innovation, underscoring the need for balance between management and instructional leadership.

#### **6.8.2. Instructional Leadership Gap**

Instructional leadership was the weakest dimension (70.5%), indicating limited focus on teaching and learning. Principals appear constrained by administrative workloads and insufficient training in pedagogical supervision (Hallinger & Chen, 2015). Key weaknesses include inconsistent classroom observations, limited support for differentiated instruction, and inadequate use of performance data. Strengthening principals' instructional expertise through targeted professional development is essential for sustained school improvement.

#### **6.8.3. Technology, Inclusion, and Community Engagement Deficits**

Low ratings for technology integration (58%), awareness of learner diversity (62%), and community engagement (64%) highlight modern leadership challenges. Many principals lack infrastructure, training, and autonomy to promote digital or inclusive education effectively. Enhancing leadership programs to include digital literacy, inclusive education strategies, and school–community partnership development would address these 21st-century priorities.

#### **6.8.4. Gender-Based Evaluation Patterns and Policy Context**

The more moderate evaluations by female teachers and polarized responses by male teachers suggest that gender influences perception styles, warranting attention in future research. Principals may also benefit from gender-sensitive leadership training to adapt communication and motivation strategies.

Despite centralized governance limiting principal autonomy (Jayasuriya & Semasinghe, 2015), the overall positive teacher perceptions indicate adaptive capacity within these constraints. Sustainable improvement requires policies granting principals greater decision-making authority in staffing, budgeting, and curriculum adaptation, alongside merit-based recruitment emphasizing leadership competencies.

Professional preparation for principals should prioritize instructional leadership, technology use, inclusion, and community engagement. Establishing regional mentoring and professional learning networks would further enhance capacity. Moreover, promoting gender equity in leadership appointments would strengthen diversity and collaborative school cultures.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study examined teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership capacities in Galle Division secondary schools, drawing on transformational and distributed leadership frameworks. Findings revealed predominantly positive perceptions (78%), with systems and resource management emerging as the strongest dimension and instructional leadership as the weakest. Female principals were rated higher across dimensions, and mid-career teachers expressed the highest satisfaction, indicating that both gender and professional maturity shape leadership perceptions.

Theoretically, the study extends leadership frameworks to a South Asian context, highlighting cultural and gender adaptability. Practically, it underscores that while Sri Lankan principals excel in administration, they require further support in instructional, technological, and inclusive leadership.

Policy and practice recommendations include:

- Strengthening pre-service and continuous leadership training emphasizing instructional leadership, digital literacy, and inclusive practices.
- Shifting to merit-based selection systems that value proven leadership competencies and gender diversity.
- Expanding principal autonomy in decision-making to encourage innovation.
- Investing in digital infrastructure and inclusion-focused professional development.
- Institutionalizing teacher feedback mechanisms (e.g., perception surveys, 360° reviews) for continuous improvement.

Future research should examine leadership perceptions across multiple provinces, include multiple stakeholder perspectives, and explore links between leadership and school outcomes through longitudinal or mixed-method approaches.

Overall, Sri Lankan principals are perceived as competent managers who maintain strong staff relationships despite systemic challenges. With greater autonomy, targeted development, and gender-inclusive policies, they can evolve into transformational leaders driving meaningful and sustainable educational change.

### **Declarations**

#### **Acknowledgements**

None

#### **Competing Interests**

None.

#### **Ethical Approval**

This study involved a survey of participants; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required as it posed minimal risk to participants. Permission to conduct the study and collect data was obtained from the relevant Zonal Education Office and the school principals.

#### **Author's Contribution**

**Author<sup>1</sup>:** Conceptualization, review of literature, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, review, and resubmission (100%)

### Data availability

The data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available, as they are solely in the possession of the authors. The retrieval and screening strategies are detailed in the Method section of this study. The dataset has not been stored or deposited in any public repository.

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