

Principals' Leadership in Building Teachers' Work Culture: A Phenomenological Study in Indonesian Junior High Schools

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.47625/fitua.v7i1.1185>

Article	Abstract
<p>Article History : Received : Dec, 05, 2025 Reviewed: March, 13, 2026 Accepted : May, 17, 2026 Published : June, 03, 2026</p>	<p>This study aims to analyze how the leadership of school principals in building the work culture of phenomenological studies teachers in Indonesian junior high schools. The research method uses a qualitative approach with a Husserlian transcendental phenomenological design of data collection techniques carried out by observation, interviewing and documenting 47 informants <i>purposively</i>, then analyzed using three thematic isolation techniques (holistic, selective, in-depth). The validity of the data is guaranteed through triangulation, <i>member checking</i>, and <i>bracketing</i>. The results show that the meaning of leadership has metamorphosed from an administrative manager to a performative moral role model and a transformative agent. The institutionalization of work culture forms a stable habitus through the mechanism of behavioral enculturation, ritualistic internalization, and habituation structuring. From a teacher's perspective, a positive work culture is catalyzed by relational-distributive leadership, procedural fairness, and psychological safe spaces. However, its optimization in the field is hampered by bureaucratic constraints (<i>administrative overload</i>), resistance of senior teachers, and limited infrastructure, which is contrary to supporting factors such as the positive quality of the <i>Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)</i> relationship.</p>
<p>Keywords:</p> <p><i>School leadership, Teacher work culture, Meaning of leadership, junior high school, Phenomenology</i></p>	

INTRODUCTION

Principals play a central and strategic role in creating and fostering a strong work culture in the school environment. The leadership of the principal is not just about carrying out administrative and managerial functions, but more than that it is the driving force that determines the direction, enthusiasm, and work values of the school community, especially the teachers (Tangent, 2025, p. 142-145). Through the leadership style applied, the principal forms a pattern of interaction, habits, and work ethic that ultimately becomes a work culture inherent in the educational institution (Soelistya, 2024, p. 88). From a phenomenological perspective, school leadership can be understood as a lived experience by a variety of subjects within the school community, which then forms an intersubjective meaning of how to work, interact, and contribute to achieving educational goals (Indra et al., 2020, pp. 12-15; Pardosi & Utari, 2021, pp. 210-212).

However, the reality on the ground shows that not all principals succeed in building a productive, professional, and consistent work culture among teachers (Zhu et al., 2025, p. 305-307). In some schools, a culture of discipline, responsibility, collaboration, and innovation has flourished as principals have been able to set an example and be communicative and inspire teachers. However, in other schools, the work culture tends to be weak: there are still teachers who arrive late, lack initiative, are not active in professional development, and show low commitment to their work (Saputra & Hidayati, 2024, p. 45-47). This phenomenon shows that The role of school principals in building a work culture for teachers is not uniform and cannot be understood in a reductionist way. There is a stark difference

between one principal and another in the way they instill work values, manage social relationships, and create an environment that supports teacher professionalism (Sulistiasih & Widodo, 2025). These differences may be due to leadership styles, experiential backgrounds, educational visions, the socio-cultural context of the school, or the principal's understanding of the meaning of their own leadership as a socio-pedagogical praxis (Berkovich & Hassan, 2023, pp. 56-59; Kalkan et al., 2020, p. 201).

In the theoretical context of educational leadership, various studies have shown that principal leadership has a significant impact on teacher performance, school culture, and ultimately the quality of education (Berhanu, 2025, pp. 70-80; Pardosi & Utari, 2021). Transformational leadership, pedagogical leadership (instructional leadership), and distributive leadership have become dominant paradigms in the contemporary educational leadership literature. Transformational leadership emphasizes the ability of leaders to inspire, motivate, and develop the intellectual and moral capacities of their followers through strong vision, intellectual stimulation, and individual attention (Scott, 2024). Pedagogical leadership focuses on improving the quality of learning through academic supervision, teacher professional development, and the creation of a conducive learning climate (Abdullah et al., 2020, p. 34; Berhanu, 2025). Meanwhile, distributive leadership emphasizes the delegation of leadership authority and responsibilities to various levels within the school organization, so that leadership is no longer a monopoly of the principal but a collective responsibility (Traver-Martí et al., 2021, pp. 119-122).

However, the existing literature is still limited in exploring the phenomenological dimension of school leadership, namely how principals and teachers subjectively experience, interpret, and internalize leadership in daily life in schools (lifeworld). The phenomenological approach provides a unique lens for understanding leadership not as an objective variable that can be quantitatively measured, but as a phenomenon that is lived, experienced, and interpreted by actors in its concrete context (Hite et al., 2022, p. 89). In the Husserlian phenomenological tradition, every experience of consciousness is always intentional, that is, it always points to something (intentionality). Thus, school leadership can be understood through the structure of teachers' intentionality towards the actions, attitudes, and communication of the principal (noesis), as well as the meaning that teachers give to that leadership (noema).

A teacher's work culture, from a phenomenological perspective, can be understood as a world of intersubjective life that is formed through continuous interaction between principals and teachers within the horizon of common meaning. Work culture is not just an objectively set set of rules and norms, but a social construct that is constantly negotiated, internalized, and reproduced through everyday practice (Kalkan et al., 2020). In this context, the leadership of the principal plays an important role as the architect of meaning that shapes, directs, and legitimizes the values, norms, and work practices in the school. Modeling, dialogical communication, and continuous coaching are the main mechanisms by which principals transmit and internalize the values of work culture to teachers (Khaola & Oni, 2020, pp. 156-158).

Dialogical communication, as conceptualized by Paulo Freire and Martin Buber, emphasizes the importance of an authentic, respectful, and emancipatory 'I-You' relationship between leaders and followers. In the context of educational leadership, dialogical communication facilitates a collaborative meaning-making process, in which principals and teachers jointly build an understanding of educational goals, professional values, and school development strategies (Jorge, 2021, p. 22). Dialogical communication also creates a safe space for teachers to express their aspirations, concerns, and needs, which in turn reinforces teachers' sense of belonging and commitment to the school (Berkovich & Hassan, 2023). A study by (Tran et al., 2020, pp. 401-403). It shows that the working conditions created by principals, including professional support, recognition, and opportunities to participate in decision-making, have a significant impact on the professional development and job satisfaction of teachers.

Principal modeling is a very important but often overlooked dimension of leadership in the literature on educational leadership. Modeling not only means that the principal exhibits behavior consistent with the values being taught (values embraced vs. values enforced), but also involves the process of identifying and internalizing values by teachers through social learning mechanisms. When

principals consistently demonstrate discipline, commitment, integrity, and professionalism, teachers are more likely to emulate these behaviors and internalize them as part of their professional identity (Pardosi & Utari, 2021). From a phenomenological perspective, exemplary behavior can be understood as a process of embodied communication, in which values are transmitted not only through words but also through the bodies, actions, and existential presence of leaders in daily school life.

Although various studies have examined the relationship between principal leadership and teacher performance, school culture, or school effectiveness, most of these studies employ positivistic or functionalistic approaches that tend to ignore the subjective, interpretive, and phenomenological dimensions of leadership. These studies often measure leadership through standardized questionnaires and analyze the causal relationship between leadership variables and specific outcome variables. While this approach has value in identifying common patterns and statistical correlations, it fails to capture the uniqueness, complexity, and dynamics of leadership as experienced by actors in their concrete contexts (Hite et al., 2022; Yagan et al., 2022, p. 55).

From some of the previous studies above, the majority of the research uses quantitative methods (surveys/correlation) that treat leadership and work culture as separate rigid variables, not as a unit of living experience. Furthermore, previous research has not done an in-depth exploration of how intersubjective *lifeworlds* in which teachers and principals interact, in addition to previous research has not explained the fundamental reasons why the same leadership stimulus can produce contrasting work cultures in different schools

In this context, it is important to conduct research that focuses on the meaning of principals' leadership in building a teacher's work culture using a phenomenological approach. This study seeks to understand how principals interpret their role as leaders, how they internalize work values to teachers, and how these social and cultural processes shape the work culture in schools. The phenomenological qualitative approach was chosen because this phenomenon cannot be explained solely by numbers or statistical correlation, but needs to be understood through life experiences, intersubjective interactions, and perceptions of actors in the school environment. Through in-depth phenomenological interviews and participatory observations of principals and teachers, this research will reveal how leadership practices translate into concrete actions, such as fostering discipline, enforcing responsibility, motivating, creating dialogical communication, and creating a collaborative, innovative, and spiritually valuable work atmosphere.

This study also seeks to identify the factors that enable and limit school principals in building a positive work culture, both from a personal perspective (character, competence, experience), an institutional perspective (organizational structure, resources, internal policies), and the broader socio-cultural context of the community. Within the framework of Husserl's phenomenology, this study will apply bracketing to postpone or suspend the researcher's various assumptions, theories, and prejudices about leadership, so that the phenomenon of leadership can emerge and be understood as it is in the consciousness of the actors. Through phenomenological reduction, this study seeks to identify the essential structure or essence of the principal's leadership experience and the teacher's experience of that leadership.

By understanding the meaning of school leadership in depth through a phenomenological lens, this research is expected to provide a comprehensive, rich, and in-depth picture of how educational leadership plays a role in shaping a professional, disciplined, collaborative, innovative, and quality-oriented work culture for teachers. The results of this research are also expected to be a reflection material for school principals to strengthen their role, not only as administrative managers, but as transformative leaders who foster values, enthusiasm, and work culture in their school environment. Furthermore, this research is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of phenomenological studies of educational leadership, as well as practically to improve the quality of school leadership in Indonesia.

Overall, the leadership of principals in building a work culture of teachers in Indonesian junior high schools has shown high variability where the success depends on the ability of the principal to apply his leadership style so that there is a striking gap between principals who manage to build an

innovative and collaborative work ecosystem and schools that are trapped in a passive administrative work culture. However, what distinguishes the research from previous research is the use of research methods, focusing on leadership and work culture as a dynamic and continuously negotiated intersubjective construct

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with Husserlian transcendental phenomenological design to understand the experience of principals and teachers in building a work culture in schools. The research took place during November 2025 at a public junior high school in Gatak District, Sukoharjo Regency, which was chosen because it has a diverse work culture and leadership style (Gumilao & Dagondon, 2026).

The sampling technique uses purposive sampling by determining several criteria, including school principals who have served for at least two years, teachers who have been actively teaching for at least three years, and education personnel as support for triangulating the total number of informants interviewed around 47 people with a division of 47 teachers in SMPN 1 and 21 teachers in SMPN 2. Data saturation was achieved after informants, principals, teachers, and education staff from various schools at the research site.

The first step of the study was to apply the epoche, in which the researcher deferred all theoretical assumptions about leadership and organizational culture using a reflective journal to document these assumptions. Phenomenological reductions were then carried out by analyzing the units of meaning from the interview transcripts to identify important themes. Imaginative variations are carried out by comparing the experiences of various informants to find a universal structure in their experiences (Gumilao & Dagondon, 2026)

The research informants were determined through purposive sampling with the following criteria: school principals who have served for at least two years, teachers who have been actively teaching for at least three years, and education personnel as support for triangulation. Data saturation was achieved after informants, principals, teachers, and education staff from various schools at the research site.

Data collection was carried out using three methods. First, semi-structured phenomenological in-depth interviews lasting 60-90 minutes per session were recorded with the informant's consent and transcribed verbatim. Interviews explore how principals interpret leadership, their concrete experiences in exercising leadership, teachers' perceptions of leadership, and the interactions between the two. Second, participatory observations were carried out in teacher meetings, academic supervision, ceremonies, and extracurricular activities, with the researcher recording the principal's behavior, communication patterns, work climate, and work culture practices in field notes. Third, the documentation collects teacher rules, supervision reports, annual work programs, school vision and mission statements, and other relevant documents as additional data (Marlin & Gistituati, 2025)

Data analysis using Miles and Huberman models that are integrated with phenomenological principles (Sahir, 2022). The process begins with repeated data collection, followed by data reduction through horizontalization and identification of units of meaning grouped into themes. The data was presented using a thematic narrative with textual and structural descriptions. Conclusions are tentative and are continuously verified through additional data collection, triangulation, and member examination.

The validity of the data is ensured through triangulation of sources involving school principals, teachers, and education staff; technical triangulation using interviews, observations, and documentation; and time triangulation by collecting data at different times. A member check returns the transcript and preliminary analysis to the informant for verification. Peer briefings involve supervisors and colleagues to discuss processes and interpretations. The researcher also maintains a reflective journal to document the bracketing and the researchers' influence on the findings.

Research is conducted by obtaining written consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity using pseudonyms, ensuring voluntary participation with the opportunity to withdraw, and preventing any form of physical, psychological, or social harm to informants. This phenomenological approach

allows research to generate a deep and authentic understanding of the meaning of principals' leadership in building a teacher's work culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Principal Leadership in Building a Teacher Work Culture in Indonesia

This study confirms the theoretical proposition that school leadership is an important and decisive variable in the construction, navigation, and preservation of a collective work culture among teachers. Thematic analysis of qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews and participatory observation at public junior high schools in Gatak District, Sukoharjo Regency, revealed a paradigm. The principal is no longer just positioned as an administrative manager, but has metamorphosed into a moral exemplar and an architect of an ethos that organically regulates the rhythm and norms of work in the school ecosystem.

The construction of the meaning of leadership according to the principal of the respondent refers to two main dimensions: performative role model and transformative change agent. They implicitly reject the reduction of leadership roles to formal instructional functions. Instead, they emphasize that the engine of work culture development lies in modeling practices, the intensity of dialogical communication, and continuous formative coaching. Within this framework, the presence of the principal is multidimensional, not only structural, but especially moral and emotional, thus establishing a leadership model that is servantic and instructional, which is contrary to the authoritative and instructional paradigm.

What are the results of interviews conducted with several school principals in Gatak District, Sukoharjo Regency, the subjective narrative describes

Principal S.R.: *"To be honest... hmk... if I just sit at a table, giving instructions through a WhatsApp group, mm, it won't work. I always instilled in myself: if I ask the teacher to come at 7, I have to be at the gate at 6:45. Ah, that's the key. They see, they set an example. Not because they were told, but because they felt... Eh, I'm sorry I'm already there"* (Interview, 2025).

"For me, Pak S.R is a living book. Mm, he doesn't need to shout about discipline. Ehm, when we saw that he was already in school before the students came, ah, that was enough for us. That's the way he teaches without words." (Interview, 2025)

"Discipline is not a rule on paper. Eh, I saw him himself setting an example, yes already, finally I felt ashamed myself if it was too late." "Mm, yes, that's right. That example, ah, for us, is the most honest form of communication from a leader." (Interview, 2025)

"I often invite teachers to sit in the canteen or ee... under the tree. Ehm, I asked, 'Sir/Mom, ah, what's going on in class?' Mm, I want them to feel that I am a discussion buddy, not a school policeman. Eh, when they speak freely, that's where innovation ideas usually come up" (Interview, 2025)

"I often feel afraid if I am called to the principal's room. "And if he wants to be a part of it, I think he's going to be appreciated." (Interview, 2025)

"He is a good listener. Eh, when I confided about the students' problems, he didn't cut back. Mm, that's what makes me feel at home in this school." (Interview, 2025)

"Those informal discussions are, ah, for me more meaningful than rigid formal meetings." (Interview, 2025)

"Sometimes I see Mr. KS eager to accompany us in class, ee, but ouch, the pile of reports that have to be filled out on the computer... Ah, it often takes up his time." (Interview, 2025)

"Bureaucracy is our biggest enemy, mm, maybe also Pak KS's biggest enemy. Eh, time is running out for admin, not for coaching." (Interview, 2025)

"That's right, ah. Sometimes we understand why he didn't have time to observe the class, yes because he was chased by the system. (Interview, 2025)

"For me, that consistent reporting system was, mm, initially heavy. But, well, it has become a habit. Ah, now I feel less if I don't make a plan of action." (Interview, 2025)

"Mm, right. That's our breath now. A work culture formed from daily routines." (Interview, 2025)

"And the support from the committee, ah, that's important. Ehm, if the committee is supportive, we teachers also feel safer." (Interview, 2025)

From the results of the interview by the principal and teacher in Gatak District, Sukoharjo Regency above, explaining that exemplary-based leadership is the main foundation in building a disciplined attitude in the school environment, the principal realizes that rigid formal instruction, such as just giving orders through WhatsApp groups, will not be effective if it is not accompanied by real action. By showing up early at the school gates before the start of working hours, he positioned himself as a "living book" for teachers and staff. This approach triggers hesitation and personal shame in teachers if they are late, so that the discipline formed is not out of fear of sanctions or rules on paper, but is born from moral awareness that is directly inspired by the real actions of the leader.

In addition to examples, the results of this interview also emphasized the importance of informal communication spaces and humanist approaches applied by school principals. Instead of using formal workspaces that often create psychological barriers and fear for teachers, Pak S.R prefers to use a lounge space such as a canteen or an area under a tree to discuss while having coffee together. This persuasive approach succeeded in changing teachers' perceptions of the principal figure who was originally considered as a "school police" to be equal discussion partners. Through the fluid, non-pressure-free atmosphere, and the attitude of the principal who was a good listener without interrupting the conversation, the teachers felt more appreciated. This freedom of opinion ultimately stimulates the emergence of innovative ideas in learning more naturally than rigid formal meetings.

On the other hand, the results of the interviews also show that there are crucial challenges related to bureaucratic and digital administrative burdens that often take up instructional leadership time in schools. Teachers are very understanding of the situation where the principal often does not have time to observe or assist directly in the classroom because he is trapped by the demands of fulfilling reports on the computer that are pursued by the system. Although this bureaucracy is a considerable problem because it takes up a lot of coaching time, a consistent reporting process gives rise to new positive habits. In the end, the combination of exemplary leadership figures, communication that humanizes teachers, consistency of the reporting system, and the full support of the school committee succeeded in forming a new work culture that is solid and internalized into the school's daily routine.

The process of institutionalizing work culture values is carried out through three interrelated mechanisms: (1) Enculturation through Exemplary Behavior, (2) Internalization through Ritualistic Communication, and (3) Structuring through Habituation. The first mechanism operates through the charisma of values imposed by the principal, which, according to the teacher's response, has a symbolic persuasive power that goes far beyond normative discourse. The second mechanism serves as a channel to reproduce and reify values such as professionalism, accountability, and professional ethics through formal forums (meetings) and informal interactions. The third mechanism is a structural formation and routine (such as attendance requirements and reporting systems) that, through consistent implementation, generates a stable and predictable work habitus, while clarifying the horizon of expectations for all members of the organization.

From the teacher's perspective, their subjective experience of leadership reveals a preference for relational, participatory, and distributive leadership models. Teachers affirm that the legitimacy and moral authority of leaders derive from interconnectedness, procedural fairness, and the capacity to create a safe space for pedagogical innovation. A positive work culture is catalyzed by leadership that combines principled firmness with methodological flexibility, as well as providing substantive recognition of teachers' contributions. These findings also reveal a gap: in some locations, work culture

has not reached optimal because school principals are still trapped in a bureaucratic-administrative leadership logic that lacks communicative and transformative dimensions.

Contextual factors that act as enablers include: positive interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers (leader-member exchange), coherence between the values embraced and the values of the school principal enforced, the sustainability of the coaching program, and the legitimacy and support of the school committee. Instead, the factors that act as constraints are: distortion of the role of school principals due to excessive administrative overburden, which erodes their capacity for coaching functions; rejection of innovation from some teachers; heterogeneity of character and motivation among teachers; and the limited resources and supporting infrastructure required to realize the work culture strengthening program.

Discussion

The results of the study show that the leadership of the principal plays a very significant role in building a work culture for teachers, but the way this role is performed, internalized, and felt by teachers is not simple or linear. School leadership can't be understood only as a structural position that automatically creates compliance and work culture, but as a series of processes of meaning-making, communication, role models, and social interactions that slowly, iteratively, and dialectically shape the values and habits of work in the world of school life (Kalkan et al., 2020).

The principals in this study essentially interpreted their leadership as a moral responsibility and an administrative-professional responsibility (Ligaya et al., 2024). They position themselves as figures who must provide direction, inspiration, and example, but at the same time they are stuck in the demands of the bureaucracy that consume their time and energy. This situation creates a kind of existential tension between what is ideal according to educational leadership theory, which emphasizes the cultural, moral, and inspirational roles, and the reality that principals face on the ground, which is often dominated by administrative demands (Aquino et al., 2021). On several occasions, the principal showed a strong effort in setting an example, involving teachers in dialogue, and building cohesion. However, at other times, as the administrative burden increases, communication and teacher mentoring decrease. This phenomenon suggests that the leadership of principals is determined not only by personal ability or moral commitment, but also by the systemic structures that frame and limit their room for maneuver (Gumilet et al., 2021).

In the context of forming a teacher's work culture, the exemplary behavior of the principal appears as the most influential factor and the most directly felt by the teacher (Gibson et al., 2009). Teachers in this study often cited the behavior of the principal as their main source of inspiration and motivation. When principals arrive early, perform administrative duties with discipline, are open to criticism and suggestions, and treat teachers fairly and respectfully, teachers feel an internal urge to perform better and internalize exemplary values (Sidabutar et al., 2017).

However, a more in-depth and critical analysis shows that exemplary behavior alone is not always enough to form a stable and rooted work culture. Exemplary behavior will be effective if, and only if, teachers perceive the leader's actions as important, relevant, and meaningful to themselves (meaningful examples). Some teachers imitate their leader's behavior because they feel valued, are involved in the decision-making process, and feel that the principal genuinely cares about their professional development. However, there are also teachers who are passive, even apathetic, because they do not fully understand or accept the values that the principal wants to inculcate, or because they feel that the principal's example is inconsistent or inauthentic (Rifa'i, 2020).

The process of internalizing work culture values is greatly influenced by the communication pattern formed between the principal and the teacher (Handayani et al., 2021). Diabological, two-way, open, and empathetic communication creates a shared understanding of the school's goals and the reasons behind the various policies and practices implemented. In schools where principals are actively involved in dialogue, listening to teachers' complaints and aspirations, and providing space for teachers' participation in decision-making, a more harmonious, participatory, and trusting work atmosphere is created. In contrast, in schools where communication tends to be one-way, top-down, and instructive, teachers feel that the rules given are just instructions that must be followed without the need to

understand or internalize. This results in a work culture that appears to be orderly on the surface but is actually fragile, superficial, and not firmly rooted in personal values and commitments (Badaruddin, 2023).

Through the narrative collected from teachers, it is clear that the quality of interpersonal relationships between principals and teachers has a significant impact on the success of the formation of a work culture (Darlima, 2017). Teachers find it easier to follow directions and internalize the values of the principal that they consider respectful, appreciative, understanding, and caring about their circumstances. This is where the principal's leadership is perceived not only as the ability to manage or organize, but more as the ability to build emotional closeness, trust, and a sense of community. Teachers who feel valued and treated fairly tend to show higher intrinsic motivation, so that work culture is formed naturally, organically, and spontaneously through a sense of responsibility and commitment, not because of rule pressure or the threat of sanctions (Rahmawati et al., 2023).

In contrast, principals who maintain psychological distance tend to be authoritarian in their leadership style or less open to discussion and participation, creating an emotional distance that discourages teachers from actively engaging in strengthening the work culture. In such situations, teachers tend to work mechanically, meeting the minimum requirements demanded of them, but not developing a deep commitment to the school's vision and values (Aziizah, 2018). This phenomenon shows that a strong work culture requires not only clear structures and rules, but also a positive emotional climate, warm interpersonal relationships, and authentic communication.

The supporting and inhibiting factors found in this study further clarify that teachers' work culture is a complex product of the interaction between organizational structure, macro-education policies, the character and motivation of individual teachers, and school leadership style and capacity. Bureaucratic structures that burden principals with various administrative obligations often limit their opportunities to engage intensively in the process of coaching and interaction with teachers. On the other hand, local culture and pre-existing work habits also affect how quickly and deeply teachers accept and internalize the change in work culture initiated by the principal (Selfiati et al., 2021).

Teachers who are used to working loosely, with minimal supervision and without strict accountability requirements, need more time to adjust to a more disciplined, collaborative, and quality-oriented work culture. This adaptation process is not always seamless; There is often resistance, both overtly and covertly, from some teachers who are comfortable with the status quo or who feel threatened by new demands. This shows that a work culture cannot be formed instantly or through stipulations from above, but requires a continuous process of habituation, socialization, negotiation, and interpretation (Meidelina et al., 2023).

If we look at the overall dynamics of this complex situation, it can be concluded that building a work culture for teachers through school leadership is a multidimensional, multi-level, and dialectical socio-cultural process (Scott, 2024). Work culture is determined not only by formal policies or top-down instructions, but also by the quality of intersubjective relationships, the strength of existential example, the sustainability of dialogical communication, and the consistency of leaders in giving meaning to every action and policy within the framework of a coherent vision and values. When principals are able to unify and integrate the moral, structural, relational, and emotional dimensions of their leadership into reflective and transformative praxis, teachers' work cultures develop stronger, deeper, and more sustainable because work values are not only adhered to externally, but are truly internalized, understood, and internalized by teachers as an integral part of their professional identity.

Conversely, when leadership is fragmented by excessive administrative demands, when interpersonal relationships are weak or purely transactional, or when communication is ineffective and inauthentic, work cultures tend to be superficial, fragile, and prone to erosion or decline. In such situations, teachers work not out of an intrinsic commitment to professional values, but because of external coercion, control, or material incentives, which ultimately do not result in a sustainable and transformative work culture.

This study emphasizes the paradigm shift in school leadership from an administrative-bureaucratic approach to transformative and exemplary-based leadership. In the Gatak District State

Junior High School, the principal, especially Mr. S.R, no longer sees himself as a manager who controls the organization from behind the desk or through digital instructions such as WhatsApp. Instead, he positions himself as an architect of a work ethic through tangible performative actions. Attending school early before the start of working hours is a form of concrete modeling that transforms written rules into subjective moral awareness for teachers. This phenomenon proves that the legitimacy of a leader no longer comes from mere structural authority, but from moral charisma that is able to trigger suspicion and internal responsibility in his followers.

A humanistic and dialogical relational approach has also been proven to break down the psychological barrier between leaders and staff. Pak S.R's informal communication practices, such as inviting teachers to have casual discussions in the canteen or under the shade of a tree while having coffee, changed the traditional perception of the principal's room that was usually considered intimidating. By transforming his role from a school leader to a good discussion partner, the principal succeeded in creating *psychological safety*. The freedom to explore classroom problems without fear of being judged has become the birthplace of organic pedagogical innovation. There are three concepts of mechanisms in building a work culture, including exemplary behavior, ritualistic communication and habit

Although this relational leadership is effective, this study also reveals the distortion of the role of school principals due to excessive bureaucratic and digital administrative burdens. There are valid complaints from teachers about the limited time of the principal to conduct clinical supervision and instructional assistance in the classroom due to the requirement to fill out computer reports. This massive reporting system on the one hand acts as an "enemy" to the freedom of face-to-face construction. However, on the other hand, the consistency of the system paradoxically succeeded in forming a *new habitus*. Teachers who initially felt burdened, gradually internalized the demands of the report into a daily routine that fostered awareness of the importance of accountability and the preparation of a structured action plan.

The success of institutionalizing work culture in the school ecosystem is greatly influenced by interrelated contextual variables, both as *enablers* (supporters) and *constraints* (inhibitors). The main supporting factors include the quality of positive interpersonal relationships between principals and teachers (*leader-member exchange*), as well as the existence of concrete support and legitimacy from the school committee that provides a sense of security for teachers in teaching. On the other hand, the real obstacles found in the field include the limitations of supporting infrastructure, the heterogeneity of motivation and character among teachers, and the resistance of some teachers to new innovations. This gap shows that at some point, the optimization of work culture is still hampered by leadership styles in some locations that are still trapped in rigid leadership without a communicative dimension.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the proposition that the construction of a sustainable collective work culture requires a balance between principled assertiveness and flexibility. The *servant leadership model* practiced in Gatak District proves that substantive recognition of teachers' contributions and the leader's capacity to listen without interrupting the conversation is the key to retaining teachers' happiness at school at school.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the leadership of school principals plays a strategic role in shaping teachers' work culture in public junior high schools in Gatak District, Sukoharjo Regency. Leadership is not merely a formal position but a social and cultural process through which principals influence values, work ethics, and professional behavior. Principals who consistently demonstrate exemplary conduct, discipline, commitment, openness, and effective communication are more successful in encouraging teachers to internalize positive work values. The findings indicate that teachers are more likely to adopt and sustain constructive work habits when leadership is accompanied by meaningful dialogue, mutual respect, and supportive interpersonal relationships. Although administrative demands often limit opportunities for direct supervision, consistent leadership practices have contributed to the development of accountability, professionalism, and collaborative habits among teachers.

Furthermore, this study reveals that effective work culture is the result of an interaction between principal leadership, organizational structures, teacher characteristics, school culture, and educational policies. Open and participatory communication enables teachers to understand and embrace organizational values more deeply, whereas rigid and one-way communication tends to produce only formal compliance. Therefore, successful school leadership requires the integration of exemplary behavior, constructive communication, and continuous guidance. A strong and sustainable teacher work culture emerges when principals are able to balance the moral, emotional, and structural dimensions of leadership, fostering intrinsic motivation, shared commitment, and collective responsibility for educational quality improvement.

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