

A Comparative Study of Principal Leadership Styles in Public and Private Elementary Schools

Dhea Paramytha Octaviani¹, Dinar Samsunizar Pratama², Putri Intan Altafunnis³

Educational Administration

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

Bandung, Indonesia

dhea.paramytha.octaviani@upi.edu, dinars.pratama@upi.edu, putriintanltns@upi.edu

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the dominant leadership styles of school principals in two different types of schools, a public school and a private school. The study uses a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative analysis of Likert scale questionnaires with qualitative analysis through in-depth interviews and non-participatory observation. This research was conducted as a case study at a Public Elementary School in Bandung City and a National Islamic Private Elementary School in West Bandung Regency. This study explores how the ownership status of school affects the chosen leadership priorities and styles. The results of the analysis show fundamental differences where the Public Elementary School principal is dominant in active Instructional Leadership ($\bar{x}=4.0$) and Digital Leadership ($\bar{x}=3.9$), followed by Visionary Leadership ($\bar{x}=3.8$). Despite the high digital score, qualitative results confirm that leadership in the public school remains focused on developing teacher capabilities through structured coaching and direct intervention, indicating that the implementation of digital leadership is not yet fully oriented toward a long-term vision. In contrary, the Private Elementary School principal practices Digital Leadership ($\bar{x}=4.3$), which emphasizes efficiency, data-based accountability systems, and managerial delegation, as well as Value-Based Leadership ($\bar{x}=4.2$), focusing on instilling strong values of integrity, ethics, and authenticity as a foundation for building trust within the school environment. Although both leaders possess strong character foundations in Authentic and Value-Based Leadership, both face similar challenges in the Servant Leadership dimension (lowest $\bar{x}$ in Public School = 3.3; National Islamic Private School $\bar{x}=4.0$) due to high output demands and limited time for deep personal engagement. These findings conclude that school ownership status is a crucial determining factor in defining leadership strategies, where public schools invest in human resource development and program image, while private schools invest in digital systems and data accountability to maintain competitive advantage.

Keywords: Digital leadership; Instructional leadership; Leadership style; Private school; Public school

Introduction

Leadership is a primary determinant of the success of an educational organization, as organizational activities can hardly function without the existence of a leader to convince members to carry out tasks with enthusiasm (Besse, 2016; Utomo et al., 2025; Vicuña & Dominguez, 2025). As the highest authority, the school principal holds full responsibility for managing resources and guiding the entire academic community toward optimal educational goals (Hasana et al., 2025). However, in practice, principals often face managerial problems, resource constraints, and internal resistance that demand strengthened accountability and adaptation to contemporary challenges (Daud, 2024).

The success of a school is heavily influenced by how the principal manages instructional programs directly to ensure quality learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Furthermore, the integration of technology in school management has become an urgent necessity for educational stakeholders in the changing paradigm of the 21st century (Prabhakar & Kumar, 2022). To drive significant school performance, a principal must be able to integrate various leadership styles, such as transformational and instructional leadership (Marks & Printy, 2003). In this context, excellent leadership must be visionary, inspirational, and adaptive to drive educational transformation in a dynamic and complex era (Wisnu et al., 2025).

Interestingly, the demand to be "adaptive" is interpreted differently depending on the school's environmental context. In Indonesia, the difference in ownership status between public and private schools creates contrasting leadership dynamics (Amalia et al., 2025; Kurniady et al., 2024; Ningrum et al., 2025). Public schools are often tied to rigid bureaucracies, while private schools are required to be more flexible and competitive to meet the expectations of stakeholders and the market (Astika & Wismar, 2024).

Despite the extensive literature on the urgency of leadership, there is still a lack of in-depth comparative studies on how dominant leadership styles, such as instructional and digital styles, are prioritized in these two different types of schools. Therefore, this study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of dominant principal leadership styles at a Public Elementary School in Bandung City and a Private Elementary School in West Bandung Regency. By understanding the contrasting orientations between direct instructional intervention and system-based digital accountability, this research is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of effective leadership models for diverse educational institutions.

Methodology

The study uses a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative analysis of Likert scale questionnaires with qualitative analysis through in-depth interviews and non-participatory observation. This research was conducted as a case study at two distinct locations: a Public Elementary School in Bandung City and a National Islamic Private Elementary School in West Bandung Regency. The participants in this study were teachers and staff members who acted as primary subjects to provide triangulated data regarding the leadership practices of the school principals as the object of research in their respective environments.

The quantitative data were gathered using a structured questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale, measuring eight key leadership dimensions: Visionary, Instructional, Transformational, Value-based, Servant, Authentic, Spiritual, and Digital Leadership. To ensure depth and context, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with representative teachers and vice-principals. Additionally, non-participatory observations were conducted over two weeks in November 2025 to witness daily leadership manifestations and the integration of digital tools in school management.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the mean ($\bar{x}$) scores for each leadership dimension, which served as the foundation for developing the leadership profiles. Meanwhile, qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman technique, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Sugiyono, 2013). The integration of both data sets allowed for a comprehensive comparative analysis of how school ownership status public versus private influences leadership behavior and long-term strategic focus.

Results and Discussion

Based on the descriptive statistical analysis of the eight leadership dimensions, distinct profiles were identified between the Public Elementary School (PES) and the Private Elementary School (PRES) principals.

In the PES, the highest scores were observed in Instructional Leadership ($\bar{x}=4.0$) and Digital Leadership ($\bar{x}=3.9$). This indicates a strong commitment from the principal to be directly involved in improving the quality of classroom learning. Meanwhile, the PRES principal showed a dominant profile in Digital Leadership ($\bar{x}=4.3$) and Value- Based Leadership ($\bar{x}=4.2$), reflecting a focus on systemic efficiency and the reinforcement of institutional values as the operational foundation.

Although both schools achieved high scores in Digital Leadership, qualitative findings showed fundamental differences in orientation. In the Public School, digital leadership tends to be short-term and operational, such as utilizing platforms for daily administration and mandatory reporting. The principal remains primarily focused on developing teacher capabilities through structured coaching and direct instructional intervention in the field.

On the contrary, in the Private School, Digital Leadership has been adopted as a long-term strategy to maintain competitive advantage. The principal emphasizes a data-based accountability system, utilizing digital analytics (such as ANBK/TKA results) as transparent evidence of quality for the Foundation and parents. In this context, technology is not merely an administrative tool but a managerial instrument for efficiency and professional delegation (Altassan, 2025; Chasokela & Ncube, 2024; Nurhadi et al., 2024).

An interesting finding emerged in the Servant Leadership dimension, which received the lowest scores in both institutions ($\bar{x}=3.3$ in PES and $\bar{x}=4.0$ in PRES). Interview results confirmed that high demands for academic output and limited managerial time are the primary obstacles preventing principals from engaging in deep personal involvement with staff. This aligns with the common challenges of resource constraints and internal resistance often faced in educational management (Daud, 2024).

The results of this study confirm that school ownership status acts as a crucial determining factor or filter in defining leadership strategies. Public schools tend to invest in human resource development and program branding through instructional interventions due to bureaucratic requirements and national quality standards. In contrast, private schools invest more heavily in digital systems and data transparency to maintain stakeholder trust and survival in a highly competitive educational market (Alhejii, 2026; Irdiyanti et al., 2023; Teodorovicz et al., 2023). This proves that effective leadership must be capable of adapting to organizational culture and external environmental demands (Wisnu et al., 2025).

The comparison of these leadership style scores is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Average Quantitative Score Based on the Result of the Likert Questionnaires

Leadership Styles	Average Quantitative Score	
	Public School	Private School
Visionary	3,8	4,1
Instructional	3,7	4,0
Transformational	4,0	3,9
Spiritual	3,6	4,0
Value-based	3,7	4,2
Authentic	3,5	3,9
Servant	3,3	4,0
Digital	3,9	4,3

Conclusion

This study concludes that school ownership status is a crucial determining factor in defining leadership strategies. Public elementary schools tend to prioritize Instructional Leadership through direct teacher coaching to meet national quality standards and bureaucratic expectations. In contrast, private elementary schools

prioritize Digital Leadership and Value- Based Leadership as managerial tools to ensure systemic efficiency and maintain stakeholder trust in a competitive market. Despite these differences, both types of institutions face significant challenges in Servant Leadership due to high administrative demands and limited time for personal engagement. These findings suggest that school principals must balance digital efficiency with a "human-centered" approach to ensure sustainable school improvement.

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