

## Analysis of Key Factors in Successful Senior High School Principal Leadership

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Vol. 23 No. 1 April (2026)

### ARTICLE HISTORY

**First Received:** 2026-03-09

**Revised:** 2026-04-25

**Accepted:** 2026-04-30

**Published:** 2026-05-12

#### Keywords:

Key Factors, Successful Leadership, High School Principals, High Schools

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#### Published by:

UIR Press

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the factors that contribute to successful principal leadership at SMA Negeri 1 Bunut. Principal leadership is pivotal to the quality of teaching–learning processes and student outcomes; understanding the critical determinants of effective leadership can strengthen secondary-school leadership, particularly in under-researched regional contexts. The study aimed to analyse those critical factors from the principal’s experience and perspectives. A qualitative case-study approach was adopted. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal, supplemented by field observation and document review, and were analysed using thematic analysis and source triangulation. Six overarching themes were identified: motivation to serve in one’s home region; strategies emphasising collaboration, discipline, and collegiality; transformational leadership; direct communication and communication via social media; role modelling as a critical factor; instructional leadership; and a focus on process. Leadership effectiveness was assessed in terms of academic and non-academic achievement, teacher and staff satisfaction, management effectiveness, and achievement of the school’s vision and mission. In sum, successful leadership at SMA Negeri 1 Bunut is underpinned by role modelling, transformational leadership, and attention to both instruction and students’ character development. Other principals and policymakers are encouraged to prioritise role modelling, teacher professional development, instructional leadership, and process-oriented evaluation.

 [https://doi.org/10.25299/ajaip.2026.vol23\(1\).27495](https://doi.org/10.25299/ajaip.2026.vol23(1).27495)



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## INTRODUCTION

School principals play a critical role in shaping learning conditions, mobilising teachers, and steering school improvement. Contemporary evidence indicates that principals’ leadership behaviours and practices are associated with student outcomes, teachers’ instructional practices, and school organisational health (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019); (Grissom et al., 2021). Advanced meta-analytic work similarly concludes that principal leadership is positively associated with student achievement, although effect sizes vary depending on context and measurement approaches. In Indonesia’s diverse educational landscape, principals must align their leadership with school-community expectations and local culture (Halim, 2015). Simultaneously, secondary schools face demands arising from digital transformation, character education, and improvements in the quality of learning processes—conditions that call for adaptive, instruction-focused leadership.

Nevertheless, much school leadership research in Indonesia remains concentrated in urban settings or relies on broad surveys that provide limited insight into day-to-day leadership practices in schools. The research gap addressed here is the scarcity of in-depth qualitative case studies exploring how principals of regional public senior high schools construe “success,” which practices they prioritise, and which factors they regard as most consequential for everyday leadership. Accordingly, this study foregrounds SMA Negeri 1 Bunut—a regional school that has received comparatively little scholarly attention—to offer a more detailed, context-sensitive account.

The novelty of this study lies in (1) focusing on a regional public senior high school where leadership tenure at the same institution is extensive, (2) mapping critical factors grounded in field findings and synthesising them into a configurative account rather than a disconnected list, and (3) critically examining “role modelling” and “instructional leadership” as core success factors, including associated opportunities and risks. The study is intended to yield practical contributions for strengthening senior high school leadership and for designing principal training programmes.

Against this backdrop, the problem addressed is that critical success factors for principal leadership in regional public senior high schools have not been adequately mapped in detail from grounded, experiential evidence. The research question is: What are the critical factors that make principal leadership successful at SMA Negeri 1 Bunut? The objective is to unpack those factors through the principal’s experiences and perspectives and field practices, and to formulate recommendations for principals and policymakers.

### **Theoretical Review And State Of The Art**

Recent scholarship suggests that principal leadership “matters,” yet the mechanisms are complex. Reviews and meta-analyses report associations between leadership and student outcomes, teacher practices, and school organisational health; however, effects are strongly contingent on context, leadership models, and research design quality (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2003). Qualitative inquiry therefore remains necessary to explain how leadership practices operate in everyday school life, especially in contexts that are under-documented.

This article discusses critical factors for successful leadership through three lenses: (1) leadership that structures learning processes (instructional focus), (2) leadership that builds organisational conditions (culture, discipline, collaboration, communication), and (3) leadership that adapts to change (e.g., using social media for communication). These lenses connect field findings with relevant theory and empirical evidence while addressing practical needs in schools (Grissom et al., 2021); (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2014). The inquiry is bounded to the principal’s perspectives and experiences as the primary informant. To mitigate single-source bias, interview data were complemented by observations and documents and analysed thematically so emergent patterns could be presented systematically (Creswell, 2014); (Robert K Yin, 2021). The study is exploratory and does not test hypotheses; its focus is eliciting critical factors from the principal’s lived experience in the field.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study employed a qualitative single-case design (Sugiyono, 2021). Qualitative inquiry was used to examine meaning and context in depth (Sugiyono, 2021). A case study investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when phenomenon and context are difficult to separate (Robert K Yin, 2021). This approach was selected to understand principal leadership from an insider perspective; case study methodology enables SMA Negeri 1 Bunut to be examined as a bounded unit (Creswell, 2014). Because the analytical focus is critical factors supporting successful leadership in this school, a single-case design was deemed appropriate for exploring the principal’s experiences and perceptions (Robert K Yin, 2021). (Robert K Yin, 2021) notes that a single case is fitting when the case is unique or critical and the researcher seeks deep understanding within a particular context. SMA Negeri 1 Bunut was selected because the principal has extensive leadership tenure at the same school, satisfying criteria for an informative key informant (Creswell, 2014).

The study is also responsive to contemporary issues in secondary education, including demands to improve instructional quality, strengthen character education, and adapt communication practices to digital environments. Findings are therefore interpreted not merely as a “case story,” but as practical leadership lessons that can inform process improvement (Grissom et al., 2021).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal of SMA Negeri 1 Bunut. The interview guide addressed tenure length, motivation, leadership strategies and styles, communication,

decision-making, teacher development, critical success factors, practices perceived as effective, essential competencies, success indicators, self-development, future aspirations, and advice for other principals. In-depth interviewing was chosen because it can yield rich experiential accounts (Creswell, 2014). Interview data were supplemented by school observations and document analysis (e.g., vision and mission statements, annual reports) to strengthen contextual grounding and credibility; multiple data sources align with qualitative design principles (Miles, M. B. et al., 2020). Observations were used to examine leadership practices in situ; documents were used to corroborate the principal's statements (Robert K Yin, 2021).

Field data were analysed using thematic analysis (Najmah et al., 2023). Patterns and themes were derived from interview transcripts. Thematic analysis is understood as a method for identifying and reporting patterns (themes) in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006); (Najmah et al., 2023) illustrate its application in qualitative educational research. The procedures followed were: familiarisation, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, defining and naming themes, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis was primarily inductive—themes emerged from data—although findings were subsequently discussed in relation to the literature (Miles, M. B. et al., 2020). Triangulation combined interviews, observations, and documents to enhance trustworthiness. (Rahardjo, 2010), argues that triangulation helps verify consistency across sources. Ethical safeguards included informing participants of the study's purpose and obtaining consent; informant identities were not disclosed (Creswell, 2014) Credibility was supported through triangulation and iterative theme checking; transferability depends on sufficiently thick contextual description so readers can judge applicability to other settings (Miles, M. B. et al., 2020); (Rahardjo, 2010).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts with the principal of SMA Negeri 1 Bunut yielded six themes as critical factors for successful leadership. Each theme is discussed, linked to literature, and illustrated with quotations or summaries of the principal's responses. Thematic analysis was used to present findings in an organised, interpretive manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006); (Najmah et al., 2023).

### **Leadership Experience and Service-Oriented Motivation**

The principal served two consecutive terms: eight years followed by five years. Long tenure at the same school afforded exposure to multiple developmental phases of the institution and deep contextual understanding. The principal's primary motivation was "to educate and nurture children in the region where I was born," reflecting a commitment to service and attachment to the home region. Scholarship suggests effective school leadership typically stems from commitment to student learning and the school community rather than purely administrative concerns (Grissom et al., 2021); (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019) Attachment to one's birthplace in Indonesia also reflects local values that can strengthen community acceptance of school leadership (Halim, 2017). In synthesised research, meaningful goals and community commitment often sustain consistent school direction (Grissom et al., 2021).

### **Strategies of Collaboration, Discipline, and Collegiality**

To realise the school's vision and mission, the principal employed "collaboration, discipline, and collegiality." Together, these elements fostered a cohesive, purposeful culture. At the practice level, teacher collaboration was a key pathway for instructional improvement, while discipline supported orderly learning processes and school governance. Collegiality strengthened a supportive climate and reduced resistance to change (Halim, 2015) notes that school context and culture shape leadership effectiveness. Broadly, research links principal behaviour to school organisational health, instructional practices, and student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021): (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019) Thus collaboration, discipline, and collegiality may function as an integrated "cultural package" supporting school effectiveness when enacted consistently.

### **Transformational Leadership and Communication**

The principal described a transformational leadership orientation. The literature positions this approach as fostering change, building shared direction, and strengthening stakeholder engagement. Evidence syntheses also caution that no single leadership model is universally superior; effectiveness often depends on fit with school needs (Falah et al., 2025). Regarding communication, the principal developed channels “directly and indirectly through social media.” Social media use signals adaptation to digital environments and flexible communication with teachers, staff, students, and parents. Syntheses of two decades of research indicate effective principals typically maintain communication, cultivate healthy workplace climates, and keep school practices running smoothly (Haryani et al., 2022).

### **Decision-Making and Teacher Professional Development**

For major decisions, the principal relied on standards of “appropriateness and feasibility,” promoting reasonable, ethical, and accountable choices. Fair and defensible decisions also strengthen trust among school stakeholders. To enhance teacher competence, the principal “encouraged further education and participation in training.” Research links principal support for teacher development and improved working conditions to better instructional practices and school climate (Grissom et al., 2021); (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). ). Decision-making anchored in appropriateness and feasibility further fosters fairness and policy predictability—important for healthy organisational climates (Halim, 2015).

### **Role Modelling as a Critical Factor and Instructional Leadership**

When asked about the critical factor for leadership success, the principal emphasised “role modelling.” Role modelling is central to leadership legitimacy and follower acceptance. In practice, role modelling helps disciplinary and ethical standards feel equitable because they begin with the leader. Reviews and meta-analyses associate principals’ culture-building practices, trust-building, and healthy organisational climates with teachers’ instructional practices and student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021); (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019).

The practice regarded as most effective for improving school performance was “instructional leadership.” An instructional focus aligns with meta-analytic evidence of positive associations between principal leadership and student achievement, although effect magnitude depends on context and measurement (Halim, 2015). Role modelling and instructional focus thus emerge as pillars of success at SMA Negeri 1 Bunut: role modelling embeds school strategies in everyday behaviour, while instructional leadership keeps organisational change anchored to the school’s core educational mission. These findings also resonate with the Indonesian context, where role modelling is often the most readily accepted leadership idiom among teachers and school communities (Amirudin et al., 2025).

### **Strategic Competence and Indicators of Success**

The principal regarded the most important competency as being able to “read opportunities and transform weaknesses into strengths,” reflecting strategic thinking and resilience amid change and limited resources (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). Leadership success was assessed through (1) academic and non-academic achievement, (2) teacher and staff satisfaction, (3) effective management, and (4) achievement of vision and mission. The overarching indicator of school success was “achievement of the school’s vision and mission.” This multidimensional measurement suggests the principal pursued not only academic scores but also processes, organisational climate, and alignment with vision and mission. Emphasis on vision–mission, stakeholder satisfaction, and management reflects a multidimensional view of school effectiveness—beyond academics alone (Grissom et al., 2021) ; (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019) The capacity to convert weaknesses into strengths also reflects growth mindset and adaptive capacity amid policy shifts and educational demands (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012).

## Self-Development, Future Vision, and Recommendations

The principal reported ongoing development through “transformation and effective communication.” Educational leaders must continually adapt to emerging demands (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). principal’s future aspiration was to make the school “a reference point for student character development,” signalling long-term orientation and attention to character alongside academics. Advice for other principals was to “focus on the process.” Literature stresses that sustainable improvement depends on process quality and consistent practice rather than short-term outcomes alone (Grissom et al., 2021); (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Findings from SMA Negeri 1 Bunut illustrate critical factors within one school while offering guidance transferable to other principals and policymakers (Halim, 2015). A vision emphasising character development aligns with national character education priorities; school leadership must pursue not only academic results but also character formation and healthy climates (Grissom et al., 2021).

## Critical Reflection on the Findings

These findings describe not only what the principal does but also invite critical commentary. First, discipline and collegiality require balance. Strong discipline clarifies performance standards; without role modelling and fair communication, discipline risks being perceived as mere control. Conversely, excessively loose collegiality may blur performance expectations. Role modelling bridges rules and practice so discipline and collegiality can coexist as workplace culture (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019); (Grissom et al., 2021).

*Second*, communication via social media offers advantages (speed, parental reach, efficiency) but may also generate misunderstanding, information overload, or excessive communication burdens without clear protocols. Social media use therefore requires communication ethics, clarity about official channels, and message consistency to sustain stakeholder trust (Grissom et al., 2021).

*Third*, treating instructional leadership as the most effective practice underscores that improvement should return to the school’s core: the quality of learning processes. Yet meta-analyses emphasise that principal effects on achievement are often indirect and context-dependent. Thus “focus on instruction” must be translated into concrete, feasible steps suited to local conditions—not reduced to sloganeering.

*Fourth*, these themes are mutually reinforcing: service motivation grounds consistent strategies of collaboration, discipline, and collegiality; transformational leadership and communication support decision-making and teacher development; role modelling and instructional focus sit at the centre; strategic competence and multidimensional indicators reveal how the principal evaluates success and cultivates vision. This pattern aligns with contemporary syntheses emphasising combined effects of instructional practices, organisational management, and contextual adaptation (Grissom et al., 2021). summary of themes and interview content appears in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes of Key Factors for Successful Leadership of the Principal of SMA Negeri 1 Bunut

Number	Theme	Main Content of the Interview
1	Experience and motivation	First term: 8 years; second term: 5 years; motivated to educate and nurture children in his hometown
2	Leadership strategy	Cooperation, discipline, kinship
3	Leadership and communication styles	Transformational; direct communication and via social media
4	Teacher decisions and development	Fit and proper; encourage further education and training
5	Key factors and effective practices	Exemplary behavior; educational leadership
6	Competencies and indicators of success	Read opportunities, weaknesses become strengths; achievement, satisfaction, management, vision and mission
7	Self-development and recommendations	Transformation and effective communication; character reference school; focus on process

Table 1 summarises thematic analysis results from the principal interview at SMA Negeri 1 Bunut. The first column lists theme numbers and titles; the second summarises the principal’s responses. The table functions as a concise map so readers can view six identified aspects and core content simultaneously. Theme order follows the interview flow: from experience and motivation, strategies, leadership style and communication, decision-making and teacher development, critical factors and effective practices,

competencies and success indicators, to self-development and recommendations. The table thus depicts an interconnected configuration rather than a mere list.

Deepening the analysis foregrounds critical success factors. The principal explicitly identified role modelling as pivotal. Here role modelling is not mere politeness or personal discipline but consistent modelling of values and behaviours that teachers and staff deem worthy of emulation. Literature treats role modelling as a major pathway through which principals influence learning outcomes (Hallinger, 2011). At SMA Negeri 1 Bunut, role modelling appears foundational: it turns strategies of collaboration, discipline, and collegiality from rhetoric into practice led from the top; without role modelling, those strategies risk becoming wall-mounted rules. The second emphasis is instructional leadership. The principal identified instructional leadership as the most effective practice for improving school performance, consistent with evidence that leadership prioritising teaching and learning improvement positively affects student outcomes (Robinson & Timperley, 2007); (Hallinger, 2011). Role modelling and instructional leadership reinforce each other: principals who model commitment to learning while focusing on improving teaching foster climates conducive to school effectiveness.

Motivation to serve in one's birthplace functions as long-term drive, supporting persistence through obstacles and alignment with vision and mission; literature connects community commitment with effective educational leadership (Hallinger, 2011); (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2003). Strategies of collaboration, discipline, and collegiality build cohesive organisational cultures; teacher collaboration and discipline support learning processes, while collegiality strengthens supportive climates and reduces resistance (Halim, 2015); (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). Transformational leadership and social media communication signal adaptation to contemporary conditions alongside empowerment-oriented engagement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2014). Decision-making grounded in appropriateness and feasibility, coupled with teacher development support, strengthens trust and teacher capacity (Hallinger, 2011); (Robinson & Timperley, 2007). Competence in converting weaknesses into strengths reflects strategic resilience; multidimensional success indicators (achievement, satisfaction, management, vision-mission) show attention to processes and climate—not only numeric outcomes (Larsson & Löwstedt, 2023). Self-development and the vision of becoming a character-education reference school underscore long-term orientation; the recommendation to “focus on the process” aligns with literature emphasising process quality for sustainable improvement (Larsson & Löwstedt, 2023).

Overall, the six aspects in Table 1 form an integrated whole: motivation and long tenure underpin strategic and stylistic choices; role modelling and instructional leadership constitute the core, supported by communication and decision-making; strategic competence and multidimensional indicators portray how the principal evaluates and develops self and vision. This aligns with models positioning leadership for learning at the centre with contextual supports (culture, communication, teacher development) at the periphery (Hallinger, 2011); (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). SMA Negeri 1 Bunut's findings enrich Indonesian educational leadership scholarship, particularly regarding role modelling and instructional leadership as critical success factors (Halim, 2015); (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

Thematic analysis of interviews with the principal of SMA Negeri 1 Bunut indicates that critical factors for successful leadership include: (1) motivation to serve in one's home region; (2) strategies emphasising collaboration, discipline, and collegiality; (3) transformational leadership with direct and social-media-mediated communication; (4) decision-making grounded in appropriateness and feasibility alongside support for teacher development; (5) role modelling as a critical factor and instructional leadership as the most effective practice; and (6) strategic competence in reading opportunities and converting weaknesses into strengths. Success indicators encompass academic and non-academic outcomes, teacher/staff satisfaction, effective management, and achievement of vision and mission. Leadership success at this school is thus supported by role modelling, transformational leadership, attention to instruction and character, and

process orientation—consistent with scholarship on leadership for learning and transformational leadership (Hallinger, 2011); (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2014); (Robinson & Timperley, 2007).

Other principals and policymakers are advised to prioritise role modelling, teacher development, instructional leadership, and process-oriented evaluation ((Hallinger, 2011);(Robinson & Timperley, 2007). District education offices and training institutions may use these findings to design leadership modules emphasising role modelling, instructional focus, and communication and decision-making anchored in appropriateness and feasibility. A limitation is reliance on a single primary source (the principal). Future research could involve teachers, staff, and students to triangulate perceptions and extend inquiry to other regional schools (Creswell, 2014); (Robert K Yin, 2021). Nonetheless, depth from an experienced principal permits rich insight into critical factors for successful leadership at SMA Negeri 1 Bunut (Miles, M. B. et al., 2020).

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