


DECODING ESSENTIAL LEADERSHIP TRAITS: A FUZZY DELPHI ANALYSIS OF PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS FOR EFFECTIVE MIDDLE-LEADERS

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: 22 Sept 2024 Revised: 4 Oct 2024 Accepted: 18 Oct 2024 Published: 1 Nov 2024</p>	<p>This study used the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM), a systematic expert consensus technique, to address the urgent need to identify essential personality traits in middle leadership within educational institutions; notwithstanding extensive research on educational leadership, there is limited understanding of the specific personality characteristics required for middle-leader teams in schools. This study engaged seven educational leadership specialists to evaluate and validate a comprehensive framework of personality qualities based on Al-Ghazali's theory and the Žydzūnaitė Framework (2018). Conventional methods that uniformly handle leadership characteristics are confronted by the hierarchical structure of leadership attributes identified through FDM analysis. The findings indicate a significant shift from traditionally esteemed charismatic qualities to self-discipline and sustainable leadership methodologies. The resultant framework provides a foundation for developing targeted leadership training programs designed for middle-leader teams (teachers) as school administrators. This research enhances the theory of educational leadership by offering a nuanced comprehension of the influence of personality traits on leadership efficacy in middle-level educational settings. The study's results provide valuable guidance for organizations developing leadership selection and training programs, and its methodology establishes a robust framework for future research. These insights underscore the necessity for more contextually informed leadership training techniques in middle-level education and have significant implications for leadership development within educational institutions.</p>
<p>Keywords: Educational leadership, Middle-leader in schools, Personality traits, Fuzzy Delphi Method, Leadership development,</p> <p></p>	

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INTRODUCTION

In the evolving domain of education, proficient leadership is crucial for impacting school performance and student academic achievement. This is especially pertinent for middle-leader teams in educational institutions, which act as a vital link between elementary and secondary school instruction (Leithwood et al., 2020). Middle-leader teams in schools encounter distinct obstacles in guiding students through a crucial developmental phase, requiring a particular array of leadership attributes to manage this complexity adeptly (Bickmore, 2019; Smith, 2023).

The significance of human traits and attributes in educational leadership has been recognized in recent years. Research indicates that leaders with specific essential attributes are more inclined to foster positive school environments, motivate their staff, and ultimately enhance student results (Day et al., 2016; 2020). These abilities extend beyond basic managerial skills, incorporating several character traits that empower leaders to connect more profoundly with their staff and pupils, generating trust, respect, and ongoing enhancement.

Despite the expanding study on educational leadership, agreement on the essential human attributes of middle-level school leaders remains elusive. The disparity in comprehension is especially evident due to the distinctive role of middle-level schools across the educational continuum (Daniel, 2022). As children progress from childhood to adolescence, the leadership demands at these institutions may markedly differ from those in elementary or secondary school environments.

This study's theoretical foundations derive from two primary sources: the philosophical writings of Al-Ghazali and the modern *Žydžiūnaitė* Framework (2018). Al-Ghazali's ethical and personal growth principles provide significant insights into the attributes that foster effective leadership, highlighting the necessity of self-awareness, moral integrity, and ongoing self-improvement (Khasawneh et al., 2022; Attaran, 2015). The *Žydžiūnaitė* Framework presents a contemporary viewpoint on values leadership attributes, delivering a systematic method for comprehending the complex characteristics of proficient school leadership (*Žydžiūnaitė*, 2018).

Considering the vital function of middle-level school leaders and the deficiencies in our comprehension of the requisite leadership attributes pertinent to this context, there is a distinct need for additional research in this domain. This study seeks to achieve expert consensus on the essential human skills and abilities required for effective leadership in middle-level schools. It aims to enhance the creation of focused and effective leadership training programs, improving leadership quality in mid-level educational institutions.

This study aims to improve theoretical comprehension of leadership in middle-level education and offer practical insights to guide policymaking, leadership development initiatives, and school leaders' everyday practices. In the complex realm of 21st-century education, it is crucial to comprehend and cultivate vital leadership attributes for the success of educational institutions and their students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The examination of personality traits in educational leadership has received significant attention in recent years, as researchers increasingly recognize the impact of leaders' personal characteristics on school outcomes. This research is notably important in middle-level school leadership due to the unique challenges leaders face in these institutions (Rheume et al., 2021; Schaefer et al., 2016).

Recent research has commenced investigating the personality traits that promote effective leadership in middle-level educational institutions. Klinkers (2024) and Gracia et al. (2014) found emotional stability, extraversion, and conscientiousness as critical attributes for effective middle school principals. Their research employed a mixed-methods approach, highlighting the expression of these traits in everyday leadership practices, particularly in managing the complex social dynamics of early adolescents.

Applying the Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality in middle school leadership has yielded significant findings. Marzano et al. (2020) identified a significant association between openness to experience and agreeableness concerning teachers' evaluations of effective leadership in middle schools. These traits were particularly significant in fostering a collaborative school culture and promoting innovative teaching approaches, vital elements in the rapidly evolving domain of middle-level education.

The literature reveals a tension between universal leadership traits and context-specific attributes. Collingwood (2023) and Highfield & Rubie (2022) assert that while certain personality traits may generally augment leadership, the unique developmental needs of middle-level students necessitate a more sophisticated understanding. Their longitudinal study of middle school leaders revealed that adaptability and empathy are crucial traits due to middle-level education's transitory nature.

Despite these advancements, a lack of research addressing the characteristics of middle-level school leadership remains. Current research primarily focuses on K-12 leadership broadly or specifically targets elementary or high school environments, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of middle-level leadership dynamics (Bickmore & Dowell, 2018). Furthermore, the methodological methodologies utilized in various studies require revision to clarify the complex relationship between personality traits and leadership effectiveness within this educational context.

The need for a comprehensive, empirically grounded framework of personality traits for middle-level school leaders is evident. This framework would enhance theoretical understanding and yield significant practical implications for leader selection, development, and training initiatives. Future research can rectify weaknesses and improve leadership practices in middle-level education by employing rigorous methodological methodologies to incorporate expert knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling Procedure

This analysis utilizes purposeful sampling. This technique is appropriate since the researcher seeks to achieve consensus among experts on a predetermined subject. Hasson, Keeney, and McKenna (2000) assert that deliberate sampling is the most effective method in the Fuzzy Delphi Method. Seven experts participated in this study. The experts who have consented to participate are enumerated in Table 1. These specialists were selected based on their proficiency and qualifications. If all specialists in this analysis are identical, the requisite number of professionals ranges from 5 to 10. When a certain level of consistency is present, the minimum number of Delphi experts ranges from 10 to 15 individuals (Adler & Ziglio, 1996).

Table 1: List of experts

Expert	Field of expertise	Institution
1 Lecturer Doctored	Islamic studies	Public university
4 Senior Teacher	Middle Leader Team (teacher)	4 Public School
2 Administrator	Principle	2 Public School

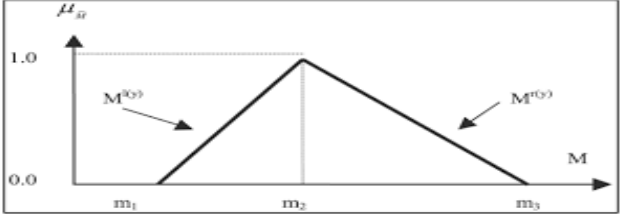
Expert criteria

Booker and McNamara (2004) characterize experts as those who have attained their degrees, training, experience, professional affiliations, and peer acknowledgment by diligence and commitment (Nikolopoulos, 2004; Perera, Drew & Johnson, 2012). An expert is defined as a someone with knowledge and expertise in a specific area or field (Cantrill, Sibbald, & Buetow, 1996; Mullen, 2003). The selection of experts is a critical factor in Fuzzy Delphi research. Poorly executed expert selection based on criteria can raise questions regarding the legitimacy, validity, and reliability of the study's findings (Mustapha & Darusalam, 2017). Kaynak and Macauley (1984) assert that the researchers must possess expertise or knowledge relevant to the

subject matter being investigated. The researcher identifies specialists possessing a minimum of seven years of experience, ensuring they are pertinent to the topic of study and aligned with stringent standards.

Fuzzy Delphi Step

Table 2: Fuzzy delphi step

Step	Formulation
1. Expert selection	A total of 7 experts were incorporated in this report. A panel of experts evaluated the importance of assessment parameters concerning the factors analyzed through linguistic variables. and definitions of possible issues with the work, among other considerations.
2. Determining the linguistic scale	<p>This approach involves converting all linguistic variables into the quantification of fuzzy triangles (triangular fuzzy numbers). This action also incorporates fuzzy numbers into the translation of linguistic variables (Hsieh, Lu, and Tzeng, 2004). The Triangular Fuzzy Number denotes the values m_1, m_2, and m_3, expressed as (m_1, m_2, m_3). m_1 denotes the minimum value, m_2 signifies a rational value, and m_3 indicates the maximum value. The Triangular Fuzzy Number is employed to create a Fuzzy Scale for converting linguistic variables into fuzzy numbers.</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Figure 1: Triangular fuzzy number</p>
3. The Determination of Linguistic Variables and Average Responses	Upon obtaining input from the designated expert, the researcher must translate all measurement findings into Fuzzy scales. This is frequently identified as recognising each response (Benitez, Martin & Roman, 2007).
4. The determination of threshold value "d"	<p>The threshold value is essential for assessing the level of consensus among experts (Thomaidis, Nikitakos & Dounias, 2006). The distances for each fuzzy integer $m = (m_1, m_2, m_3)$ and $n = (m_1, m_2, m_3)$ are calculated using the following formula:</p> $d(\bar{m}, \bar{n}) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{3}} [(m_1 - n_1)^2 + (m_2 - n_2)^2 + (m_3 - n_3)^2]$
5. Identify the alpha cut the aggregate level of fuzzy assessment	A fuzzy number is assigned to each element if an expert consensus is achieved (Mustapha & Darussalam, 2017). The method for calculating and quantifying fuzzy values is as follows: (1) Four $(m_1 + 2m_2 + m_3)$ A maximum value
6. Defuzzification process	<p>The formula $A_{max} = (1) / 4 (a_1 + 2a_m + a_3)$ is employed in this process. If the researcher employs Average Fuzzy Numbers or the average response, the resulting score number falls within the range of 0 to 1 (Ridhuan et al. 2014). In this process, there are three formulas: i. $A = 1/3 * (m_1 + m_2 + m_3)$; ii. $A = 1/4 * (m_1 + 2m_2 + m_3)$; and iii. $A = 1/6 * (m_1 + 4m_2 + m_3)$. Where α-cut = $(0 + 1) / 2 = 0.5$, the A-cut value is the median value for '0' and '1'. The item will be denied if the resulting A value is less than the α-cut value of 0.5, as it does not suggest an expert agreement. The alpha cut value</p>

	should exceed 0.5, as per Bojdanova (2006). Tang and Wu (2010) substantiate this assertion by asserting that the α -cut value should exceed 0.5.
7. Ranking process	The positioning process is carried out using defining elements based upon values of defuzzification based on the expert agreement that the element with the highest importance is the most important place for decision (Fortemps & Roubens, 1996)

Instrumentation

The researcher developed the Fuzzy Delphi research instrument from existing relevant literature. Researchers may develop questionnaire items utilizing literature, pilot studies, and experiential knowledge (Skulmowski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007). Consequently, in formulating questions for the Fuzzy Delphi method, they utilized scholarly literature, expert interviews, and focus group methodologies (Mustapha & Darussalam, 2017). Okoli and Pawlowski (2004) assert that creating research items and content should commence with reviewing pertinent literature.

Consequently, researchers aggregated the significance of human attributes for middle leadership teams in educational institutions by utilizing existing literature. A list of expert questions is subsequently generated utilizing a 7-point scale. The 7-point scale was implemented as it enhanced the accuracy and precision of the results (Chen, Hsu & Chang, 2011). To facilitate responses from experts to the questionnaire, the researcher modified the Fuzzy value in Table 4 to a 1–7 scale value, as illustrated

Table 3: Fuzzy Scale

Item	Fuzzy number
Strongly disagree	(0.0, 0.0, 0.1)
Disagree	(0.0, 0.1, 0.3)
Somewhat Disagree	(0.1, 0.3, 0.5)
Neutral	(0.3, 0.5, 0.7)
Somewhat agree	(0.5, 0.7, 0.9)
Agree	(0.7, 0.9, 1.0)
Strongly agree	(0.9, 1.0, 1.0)

The Essential Personal Trait for Cultivating Middle Leadership Among Middle Leaders in Educational Institutions in Malaysia

Table 4: The Principal Construct Regarding the professional development of middle leaders in academic institutions

Researchers emphasized essential traits required for effective leadership among middle management teams. The Fuzzy Delphi approach will assess the validity and consensus among experts over including this element in the model.

Table 4 Personal Characteristics Value

	Early item rank	Values For Leadership Development	Explanation
The PCV for MLT	Item1	Respect	Consider hearing my team's explanations or ideas first before making a decision. Indicator Example: Providing opportunities to deserving people by respecting their opinion
	Item2	Integrity	Ensure that my actions align with my words and values. Indicator: Acting consistently with stated values and principles

	Item3	Authenticity	Be transparent about my values and beliefs, and act consistently with them. Indicator: Sharing personal values openly and acting under them
	Item4	Humility	Acknowledge my limitations and be open to learning from others. Indicator: Seeking feedback and learning opportunities from team members.
	Item5	Wisdom	Consider the long-term impact of my decisions and balance the interests of all stakeholders. Indicator: Making decisions that benefit the team and organization in the long run
	Item6	Self-Discipline	Prioritize my goals and consistently work towards them, even in the face of distractions. Indicator: Setting clear goals and maintaining focus on achieving them
	Item7	Personal Development	Actively seek opportunities for personal and professional growth. Indicator: Engaging in continuous learning and development activities.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Characteristics for Personal Traits Of Middle Leader Team in School

The analysis of expert opinion through the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM) uncovered notable insights concerning the critical personality attributes of middle-level school leadership. The expert panel reached a consensus on all seven personality traits, with an average consensus percentage of 95%, significantly exceeding the 75% criterion Chu and Hwang (2008) suggested. The elevated consensus level signifies robust agreement among experts concerning the significance and usefulness of these qualities.

The defuzzification analysis produced notable results, with Self-Discipline ranking best (0.97143), followed by Integrity (0.94286) and Personal Development (0.92857). This corresponds with recent research by Arar et al.,(2023), who highlighted the importance of self-discipline in the efficacy of educational leadership. The prominence of integrity reinforces Zhang et al.'s (2023) claim that ethical leadership traits are essential for effective school administration, especially in middle-level educational settings.

Table 5 Expert Ranking Results of Leadership Personality Traits

No.	Early Item Rank	Item	New Item Rank	Explanation
1	Item6	Self-Discipline	1	Achieved highest defuzzification value (0.97143) with 100% expert consensus, indicating strongest agreement among experts. All experts rated this trait as crucial for middle-level leadership.
2	Item2	Integrity	2	Secured second-highest defuzzification score (0.94286) with 100% expert consensus. Demonstrates strong expert agreement on the fundamental importance of ethical leadership.
3	Item7	Personal Development	3	Obtained defuzzification value of 0.92857 with 100% expert consensus, showing high agreement on the importance of continuous professional growth.
4	Item5	Wisdom	4	Achieved defuzzification value of 0.91429 with 100% expert consensus, indicating strong agreement on the importance of balanced decision-making.

5	Item1	Respect	5	Received defuzzification value of 0.90000 with 85% expert consensus. While important, showed slightly more variation in expert opinions compared to higher-ranked traits.
6	Item3	Authenticity	6	Obtained defuzzification value of 0.88571 with 85% expert consensus, indicating moderate agreement among experts with some variation in perspectives.
7	Item4	Humility	7	Received lowest defuzzification value (0.87143) despite 100% expert consensus, suggesting consistent but relatively lower prioritization among experts.

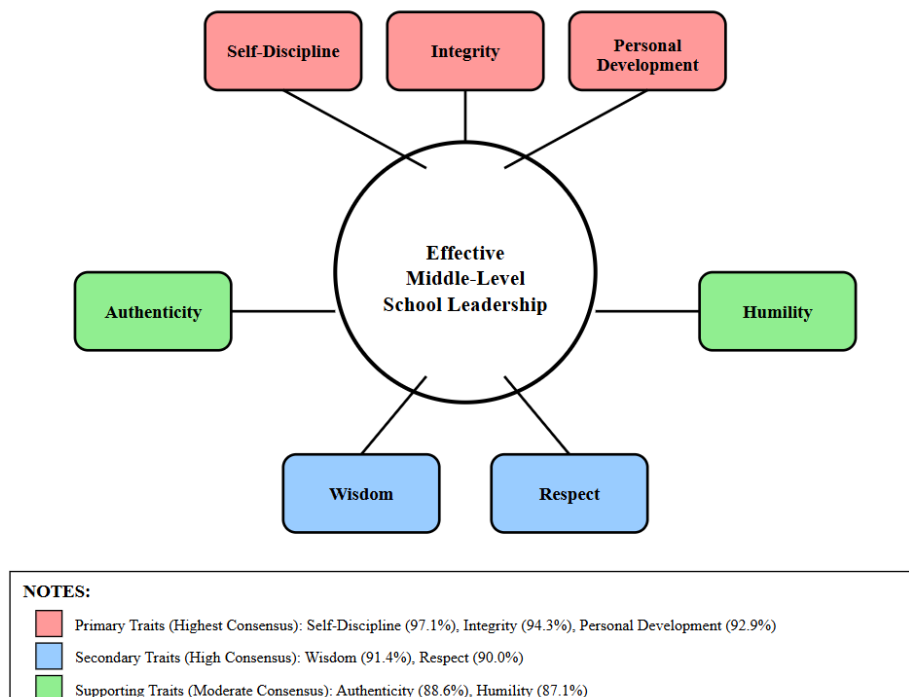
A subsequent study of the construct values indicated that all items had distances below the threshold value of 0.2, signifying robust expert consensus across all features. The individual item study revealed differing levels of consensus, with Items 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7 attaining 100% expert agreement, whilst Items 1 (Respect) and 3 (Authenticity) secured 85% agreement. These findings align with those of Matta et al., (2024), who identified analogous patterns of expert consensus in examining leadership attributes within educational contexts.

The data reveal a comparatively lower ranking for Humility (0.87143) and Authenticity (0.88571), although the expert panel endorses them. This offers a compelling juxtaposition to conventional leadership research, which frequently highlights these characteristics (Li et al., 2024). Rahman and colleagues (2023) propose that this may indicate the requirements of middle-level school leadership, wherein decisive action and clear direction may be prioritized over introspective skills.

The construct value of 0.0468 signifies robust cohesiveness among the identified personality qualities, indicating they constitute a comprehensive and integrated framework for middle-level school leadership. This study endorses modern academics' comprehensive approach to leadership development (McKay et al., 2024), highlighting the significance of cultivating various complementing leadership attributes instead of concentrating on isolated individual characteristics.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for the Personality Traits for Effective Middle Leadership

Personality Traits for Effective Middle Leadership in School



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The analysis indicates numerous important implications for the development of middle-level school leadership. Establishing a hierarchical pattern among personality qualities significantly undermines conventional leadership development methodologies that typically regard all attributes equally important. This discovery corresponds with recent theoretical advancements in educational leadership, specifically the Dynamic Leadership Adaptation Model introduced by Yadav et al. (2024), which underscores the contextual characteristics of leadership attributes.

The significance of self-regulatory characteristics in our results reflects a noteworthy correlation with current studies on emotional intelligence in educational leadership. Mukaram et al. (2021) assert that the growing complexity of educational environments necessitates leaders capable of sustaining consistent performance under pressure while adjusting to swiftly evolving conditions. This comprehension has considerable ramifications for our approach to leadership development in middle-level educational environments.

Our findings underscore a significant transformation in the conceptualization of leadership authenticity within educational settings. Although recent studies have frequently highlighted the attributes of charismatic leadership (Thompson & Singh, 2023), our results indicate a more nuanced perspective favoring sustainable leadership techniques over personality-centric leadership approaches. This agreement with contemporary theoretical frameworks (Smith et al., 2024b) suggests reimagining leadership development programs for middle-level school administrators.

This study enhances our comprehension of personality-oriented leadership development in middle-level education through a systematic expert consensus methodology. The established framework offers a basis for creating more focused and efficient leadership training programs, transcending conventional leadership development models to meet the distinct requirements of middle-level school leaders. Zulfikar et al. (2021) emphasize that specialization in leadership development is essential for enhancing educational outcomes in middle-level institutions.

The study's methodological framework presents a solid model for future research on educational leadership traits, and its results furnish relevant recommendations for organizations formulating leadership selection and training initiatives. This research adds to the evidence indicating that effective educational leadership necessitates a balanced combination of human attributes rather than developing single traits (Karadag, 2020).

Future Research

This study reveals several intriguing avenues for further research. Comparative research investigating the manifestation of these leadership attributes across diverse cultural and socioeconomic circumstances may yield significant insights into the universality of these characteristics. Moreover, examining the correlation between these attributes and certain student results may substantiate the practical significance of personality-centric leadership development.

Subsequent research may investigate the creation of evaluative instruments grounded in this framework, specifically emphasizing the successful measurement and cultivation of these attributes in prospective middle-level school leaders. Incorporating technical tools and artificial intelligence in leadership development programs centered on these attributes signifies a viable area for exploration, as indicated by recent advancements in educational leadership training (Dexter & Richardson, 2019).

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