

## **A Principal's Leadership Excellence Though Disposition of Attributes**

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**Abstract:** This study explores principals' leadership attributes. The issue of leadership remains in focus for the placement of principals in line with the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025). Leadership problems in schools are often associated with student outcomes. Therefore, this explorative qualitative study was conducted in a secondary school with the most outstanding performance. This selection of this school as the setting for this case study was driven by its principal's leadership. Data were gathered via extended interviews, observations, and item analyses. The thematic analysis of data and findings reveal three attributes of the principal's leadership namely positive attributes, professionalism attributes, and solidarity attributes as the contributing factors towards the school's success. The implications of this study show that principals possessing strong attributes are capable of being effective leaders. It is hoped that this study will contribute additional knowledge on leadership among educational administrators.

**Keywords:** attributes, principal's leadership, excellence.

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### **1 Introduction**

Leadership is the authority exerted upon the people under one's charge (Nik Nurhalida et al., 2021; Roszi et al., 2021; Saadiyah et al., 2021; Yusaini et al., 2021). A leader should be able to influence one's thoughts and actions, provide inspiration and guidance, reduce ambiguity and uncertainty, as well as resolve conflicts (Aminah et al., 2021; Azlisham et al., 2021; Een et al., 2021; Firkhan et al., 2021; Ishak et al., 2021). Meanwhile, a leader lacking in credibility would negatively affect his organisation (Mohd Norazmi et al., 2021; Zaid et al., 2020; Zaid et al., 2021; Rosnee et al., 2021). Leadership is also vital to mobilise a team, an essential duty of a leader (Norazmi et al., 2019; Fauziyana et al., 2020; Norazmi, 2020; Fauziyana et al., 2021). This study therefore explores the extent to which natural attributes contribute towards principals' leadership in schools.

#### **1.1 Problem Statement**

Studies on principals' leadership still garner the attention of researchers including those in Malaysia. This is supported by the fact that a total of 7700 information searches were related to studies on principals (Abd. Razak bin Manaf, 2017). The leadership of a principal in a school is a variable often studied to observe its effectiveness upon students' outcomes (Mitchell, Kensler, and Tschannen-Moran, 2015). The educational transformation programmes in place are geared towards enhancing school leadership (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2017). Programmes such as the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders was created based on competencies necessary for school leaders. Such competencies were built in the form of a KOMPAS model by the *Institut Aminuddin Baki* (IAB) in the year 2009, containing six modules grounded in the Malaysian School Head Competency Standards (SKKSM, 2006). However, past studies have only looked at the effectiveness of the NPQEL programme. How far, then, has this programme influenced the leadership and direction of schools?

More attention is needed especially for Sabah schools that are still left far behind in comparison to the achievements of their secondary schools in other states across Malaysia. In fact, the school in this case study was the only outstanding school in the state of Sabah, making this school unique and extraordinary. Hence, this research was conducted for a deeper investigation of how the leadership elements practised by its principal were successfully accomplished. The question that arises is: why have other schools in Sabah not been able to achieve the same level of excellence as the school in the cases study?

This shows that principals' leadership are still below satisfactory standards and incapable of bringing schools towards the level of excellence desired by the Ministry of Education. Educational leadership and management issues have long been discussed by educational experts. The study by Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) found that principals' leadership have a strong influence on the quality of a school's success, its students' achievements, and the commitment of its teachers. One channel for principals to influence students' excellence is through interaction with teachers, considering that teachers are the pulse of the school's management. Principals therefore need to play their role as education managers in school.

This study is of importance to seek solutions to minimise identified problems associated with principals' leadership. Strictly speaking, leadership is the backbone in educational aspects and thus heavily requires a principal

with efficient and effective management. As such, the selection of a principal would necessitate individuals who truly possess personal standards or personality, which are attributes that enable to perform leadership duties to manage the school. This school in this study was selected as the case as it has achieved more much student outcomes particularly in academics when compared to other schools throughout Sabah. Secondary schools in Sabah are still at low levels and need improvement. This case school could hence serve as a model for other schools in terms of leadership.

### 1.2 Research Questions

This study explored the attributes in a principal's leadership. It sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the principal's leadership attributes?
2. What can be learnt from the leadership attributes?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Leadership and attributes

The existence of leadership is grounded in human civilizations' need to uphold living as a community. It is a process of influencing the behaviour of followers towards a goal. It aims to create a common commitment to achieve cultural transformation. Leadership comprises leaders capable of influencing and instructing with every task that needs to be completed. It is the main factor that brings change to an organisation (Moo Jun Hau & Rashad Yazdanifard, 2015). Leadership is regarded as one's ability to influence the mind and behaviour of individuals within an organisation to achieve goals by following certain structures or procedures (Norhannan Ramli, 2016). It is the navigator for achieving goals in an organisation, country and formation of great civilisation

Literature from educational researchers list personality traits that provide insights on natural attributes. A local study by Noraini binti Rushbadrol, Norashikin Mahmud dan Lily Suriani Mohd Arif (2015) delved into these traits, showing that there exists a positive relationship between personality traits and performance. In addition, Holmes, Kirwan, Bova and Belcher's (2015) study discovered nine personality traits and stated that attributes have a significant relationship with performance.

Another study by Norhannan Ramli et.al (2017) also looked at leadership attributes of principals in schools, focusing on character, behaviour, and qualities possessed by the leaders. It was noted that leadership without the element of force will encourage leaders to foster a positive relationship with his followers. Meanwhile, Wanda Devis's (2017) study focused on how the leader's character supports student achievement. The principal plays a role in being responsible for the school's needs (Jamilah Man et.al, 2016) because principals are regarded as educators of mankind (Ellen Wexler Eckman, 2017). These studies were done mostly in quantitative form. However, how far do those attributes relate closely to successful leadership in schools?

### 2.2 Theoretical framework

*The Great Man* theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory appeared before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This trait approach is research focussing on the physical and personality traits of a leader (Moorhead dan Griffin, 1998). The characteristics of great leaders are often associated with leaders possessing natural features such as height, character, and intelligence. "he is born to be a leader" *Great Man* (Bass, 1990; Bass dan Bernard, 1989). Leadership success is proven through a theory known as "*The Great Man Theory*". This theory of *The Great Man* also summarises those identified as great leaders. *The Great Man* is a theory about the attributes regarding qualities possessed by great people and lays focus on the character of a head. These characteristics will set apart a head from its followers.

This framework summarises the relationship between several factors essential to the research questions based on the *Great Man* theory. Based on literature review, natural attributes can influence a principal's leadership as an identity that portrays the links of learning through social practice. The theory discussed will explain in detail how attributes exist in a person's leadership. Natural attributes are emphasised in leadership to build more effective self-development. With consideration of all the attribute elements mentioned, the researcher saw it a potential platform to explore the principal's leadership attributes in the school of the case study. The attributes possessed by the leader will offer opportunities as disposition of personality capable of influencing organisational leadership. Such benefit will be built upon a network of how attributes hold potential in creating effective principal leadership.

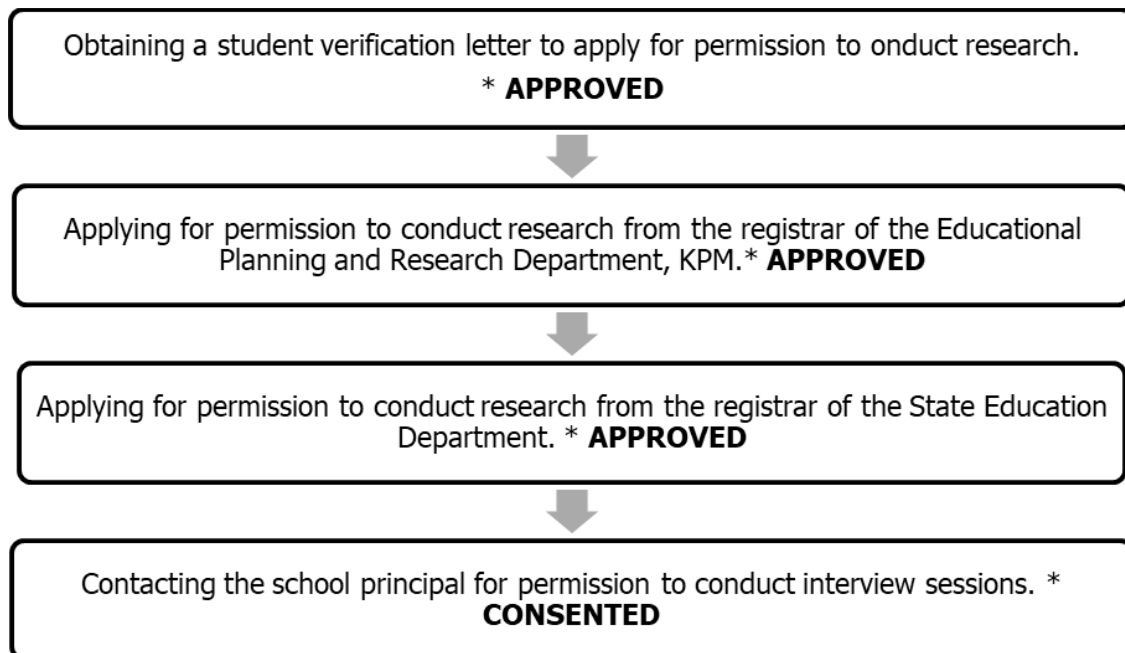
## 3. Methodology

The selection of qualitative research methods for this study requires the explanation on how the researcher decided on a case study as suitable research methodology for the main research questions (Merriam dan Tisdell, 2016). Gillham (2000) states a case as an individual, a group, an institution or a society. Creswell, (2007) dan Stake, (2008) explains a case a ‘a bounded system’ (Stake, 1995). This necessitates the researcher to be able to mine the experience of the informants in this study regarding the principal’s leadership attributes. The findings of this study would then assist the researcher in proposing a model of leadership for principals based on the more effective natural attributes to strengthen principals’ leadership in schools and uphold the teaching profession.

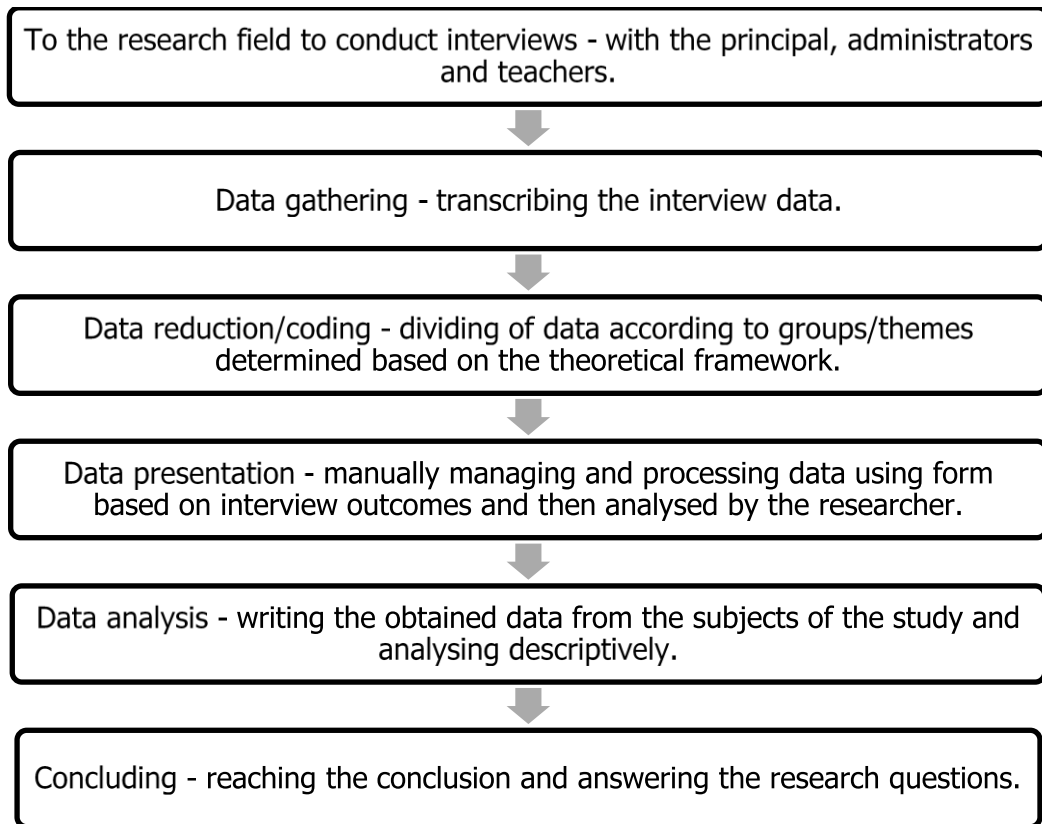
The decision for purposeful sampling also narrows the selection of specific and intended informants based on information required by the researcher (Creswell, 2012 dan Patton 2002). Purposeful sampling seeks to answer the research objectives based on the informants’ ability to provide the required information (Creswell, 2014). The informants selected for this study were in line with the needs of the study and reinforced the data of the study. Moreover, the researcher had identified informants who truly met the study’s needs because purposeful sampling is reliant on data provided by its informants.

The researcher had also held preliminary discussions prior to the interview sessions regarding the research questions and the order of the interview. This initial briefing concerned explaining the protocols of the interviews and ethical aspects that must be abided by the researcher. Besides, the informants’ written consent for interviews were also attached as proof that this data gathering procedure was purely for academic purposes and that the interview data will be kept confidential. The preparation and planning phases of the data gathering procedures are illustrated below:

#### PHASE 1



#### PHASE 2



**Figure 1: Implementation of the Data Gathering Preparation and Procedure Planning Phase**

A total of 10 informants comprising the principal, three senior assistants, four sectional heads, and two teachers. All these informants were people close to the principal's leadership. Their ages ranged from 30 to 58 years. To ensure confidentiality, all the informants' details were not revealed by replacing their identities with pseudonyms. The overall information provided by the informants in this study would help the data reach saturation level. The researcher will return to the research field if further details are needed to support initial findings. Such is the advantage of qualitative data.

The validity of qualitative data refers to the question of claiming truth. This is often questionable considering that the number of subjects in qualitative studies are typically less than those in quantitative ones. This study can be seen from many perspectives through triangulation or data findings. Ironically, a sensitivity analysis towards the validity of the research data is required to answer the rising questions before being able to achieve the research objectives. Research validity comprises four aspects, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Liamputtong, 2014). Meanwhile, the reliability of the researcher's qualitative data takes reference from the pioneers of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, namely Lincoln dan Guba (1985).

In this study, the researcher decided on member checking, audit trail, and triangulation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) for checking validity and reliability, as the researcher was also an instrument herself in this qualitative study. Triangulation and checking for repeated words expressed by the informants during the interviews were done. From the data gathered, the researcher identified and selected significant issues for analysis and processed them qualitatively according to the research questions (Lokman, 2007). This was then followed by the processes of data reduction and data display, before finally concluding the overall data obtained (Pat Bazeley, 2013).

Patton (2002) states that analysing qualitative data requires organising, constructing themes, evaluating data, and making conclusions. Meanwhile, Miles and Huberman (1994) utilise thematic content analysis. The gathered data from the interviews, observations, and document analyses in this study were also directly analysed

using Stake's Categorical Aggregation and interpretation approach (Stake, 2005). The analysis of qualitative data is a continuous process. It begins right when the data gathering is initiated. In the process of analysing data, the researcher planned and managed data on three levels, namely managing data, understanding data, and analysing data.

### 3.1 Results and Findings

The theme relates to natural attributes of the principal. The natural attributes are divided into three themes, namely positive attributes, professional attributes, and solidarity attributes. These categories are then further divided into subcategories of these attributes. The positive attributes include natural attributes of responsibility, seriousness, concern, humbleness, firm, meticulous, empathy, and having strong stamina. Professional attributes meanwhile highlight professional practice attributes such as clear instructions, quick to act, participative, person of reference, role model and ready to learn. Finally, solidarity attributes concern principal's attributes that prioritise student outcome achievement, practising enculturation, and having a vision for a strong nation.

The dominant natural attributes possessed by the principal are the positive attributes. The dominating attributes of the principal are having great enthusiasm towards the teaching career, commitment, seriousness, meticulous and firmness. The principal's attention to detail in carrying out duties as an educational leader truly complies with wholistic leadership. It is said that meticulous principals are more able to minimise mistakes and reduce conflicts with the community. Finally, the theme of natural attributes provides new knowledge that must be learnt through the principal's leadership in facing the increasingly complex challenges of educational globalisation. These attributes can improve quality of academic performance across teamwork capacities to generate understanding in lesson planning.

#### Positive Natural Attributes

It is necessary for a principal to have positive natural attributes to portray a positive image of personal excellence. A positive personality enables a principal to manage his/her behaviour and thoughts as a leader. In this study, the researcher identified the positive natural attributes possessed by the principal, among them are responsible, serious, concerned, empathetic, firm, humble, and has good stamina.

*Satu lagi dia bersedia menerima masalah. Dia seorang dinamik. Dia ikut. Dia positif.*

One more, she is ready to accept problems. She is a dynamic person. She follows. She is positive.

[TB/Infr7/11.11.2019/S7]

The interview excerpt above illustrates a teacher's view towards the principal's positive natural attributes based on data from the informant. The data information will be elaborated to observe the link and development of the principal's natural attribute, whether physically or inward.

*Bagi saya tanggungjawab tidak lain yang ini amanah.. saya akan menangis jika saya keluar dari sekolah ini..dia pernah bercakap ini.*

For me responsibility is none other than trust... I will cry if I leave this school... she once said this.

[TB/Infr10/30.10.2019/S29-30]

It can be observed that the above interview excerpt that shows the principal's responsibility attribute. According to the informant, the principal mentioned of how sad she would feel should she leave the school. This inspires confidence that the principal really loves the teaching profession and the school. From here, the researcher is able to conclude that the findings were very meaningful to know deeper about the principal's leadership based on the attribute of responsibility. The principal also sacrifices time to monitor the school even at night. All these are born out of responsibility as an educational leader. Her willingness to drop by the school at night isn't an easy act, more so for a female principal.

*Satu dia turun padang. dia sangat tahu kehendak guru .kalau dia suruh kami buat kerja. Di padang dia datang. contohnya buat kelas tambahan malam, dia datang. Dia akan belikan makanan dia rasa budak-budak kelas hujung kelas form 5..dia sendiri yang akan beli..ini membuatkan murid-murid berasa terharu terutama kelas hujung.. Antaranyalah..kalau ada problem dia terus ambil tindakan dia terus..kasi fit.*

For one, she joins her subjects. She truly knows what her teachers want. If she asks us to do a task. To the school field she comes. For example conducting extra classes at night, she comes. She will buy food she feels the students of the last class in Form 5.. she herself will buy.. this makes the students feel moved especially the back classes. Among them.. if there is a problem she immediately takes action.. she corrects the problem.

[TB/Infr6/11.11.2019/S14-15]

The interview above also shows the principal's attributes of seriousness in carrying out her duties as an educational administrator. The informant's statements that the principal always participates in school activities like "turun padang" (joins in), "dia datang" (she comes), and "dia sendiri akan beli" (she herself will buy) paints an image of the principal's behaviour from the eyes of a teacher who evaluates the authority of the principal. Such expression reinforces the principal's attributes on her willingness to show her presence even though extra classes are conducted at night. Meanwhile, the expression "she herself buys food for the students and they feel moved" shows the principal's role in increasing the passion of the teachers and exam-year students. Her personal touch and support for the teachers' sacrifices will in fact lead to more effective leadership.

Positive natural attributes are also shown in the principal's firm leadership. The firmness in leadership refers to the principal's firm character in her words and actions. The teachers in the case school are well-aware of the principal's firmness. Observe the interview data obtained from the informant below:

*Pengetua tegas..dia bertempat. Siapa tidak marah, sampai tahap limit bila siasat kenapa dia garang..ada juga masa dia tidak pula teriak. Dia guna psikologi dan berkesan juga..murid atau guru adalah satu suasana apa treatment yang kemas, dia kalau dia balik-balik tu dia jadi tegas pada sayalah yang orang tu tersentuh.*

The principal is firm.. and rightfully so. Who won't be angry when at one's limits. When investigate why she is fierce.. there are times when she doesn't scream. She uses psychology and it works.. students and teachers are one environment what neat treatment.. if repeatedly she will become firm, to me that's what moves the person concerned.

[TB/Infr4/12.11.2019/S47]

The above interview finding state that the principal will act firmly on teachers who often cause conflicts in the organisation. This firmness serves as a reminder for teachers to figure the principal's approach. The above informant shows his concurrence towards the principal's actions for resolving conflicts in the school organisation. This attribute aids in reducing stress caused by problematic teachers in the school.

Another attribute of the principal mentioned is attention to detail. In executing her leadership, the principal is often seen as a meticulous person in fulfilling her duties. This matter has been observed by the administrators and teachers in the case school.

*Tulah teliti tu.. surat ibu bapa pengangkutan, macam mana makanan semua dia tanya. Itulah dia teliti..ketelitian..perkara kecil pun tidak tertinggal. Setakat ini..susah bukan semua guru say yes..ada begitu..kita bagi tahu mereka dia teliti dan ada nilai budi bicara boleh bincang kita kena hormat dia... bagaimana susah jangan sembunyi dia pantang she very to get. Sangat sangat teliti.*

That's her very meticulous.. she will enquire on parents' letter, transport, food, all these. That's how meticulous she is.. no small detail will be left out. As of now it's difficult because not every teacher says yes..we tell them she is meticulous and has discretion, can discuss so we must respect her... no matter how difficult don't hide she will get you. Very, very meticulous

[TB/Infr4/12.11.2019/S17-27]

The interview above illustrates the attribute of meticulousness through the informant who mentions about the principal being very attentive to detail. The attribute of meticulousness essentially impacts the principal's leadership positively. With this attribute, the principal will be able to avoid negative issues. Her meticulousness was looked in depth by the researcher based on observations of the principal's daily activities in school. The principal constantly checks details of school programmes and guides teachers in carrying out their assigned duties. It was found that the principal would constantly advise on the teachers' or organising committee's actions through meetings or discussions to go address related matters. Moreover, the researcher noted that the principal would regularly conduct supervision around the school with logbook jottings.

This finding makes clear that positive attributes are an important element in a principal's leadership in school. The success of a school is dependent on the principal's wisdom in organising competent management strategies besides minimising work-related stress. Positive attributes reflect one's disposition and are manifested through systematic style of action to achieve organisational goals.

## **Professional Attributes**

The principal who possesses professional natural attributes also displays positive personal excellence. In this study, the researcher found the principal displaying professional natural attributes of leadership by way of her ability to give out clear instructions, act quickly, be participative, be a source of reference, be a role model, hold control and learn continually.

The principal also practises professional attributes in carrying out her duties with all the policies and demands of society, especially parents. The principal informed that her way to deal with those demands as principal is to discuss with her teachers what she wants to do for the school and its community. In addition, the principal wisely evaluates teachers through their skills and expertise. Such expertise demonstrates the strength that principals ought to work on to optimise work output quality. This professional practice has become the influencing factor in the principal's leadership orientation.

*Why not, kita berhadapan dengan murid ..macam-macam..amanah bah jika murid ada masalah kita jangan terus bloking..kita perlulah hayati..kalau kita tahu masalah mereka. Kitakan sebagai ibu bapa kedua.*

*Why not, we deal with students.. all sorts of trust. f students have problem we don't block them straightaway.. we need to appreciate.. if we know their problem. Aren't we their second parents?*

[TB/Infr1)/11.11.2019/S30-31]

When we consider the principal's words "we don't block them straightaway", it shows a reality that students have a second chance. In other words, the principal believes that students can change for better. In fact, the principal recommends teachers to appreciate the problems faced by students. Only then can the teachers understand the students. According to her, teachers are also the second parents of students. Such attributes clearly show that personal concern can offer strength in leading disciplinary challenges in school through professional practice.

The next interview between researcher and informant also reveals agreement towards the finding that the principal is a source of reference, particularly in matters related to students' personality.

*Pengetua sentiasa ada di sini. Sesuatu yang tidak boleh handle yang kecil pun kita sama kena beritahu dia*

The principal is always here. Anything we cannot handle we have to inform her even if it is small.

[TB/Infr3/30.10.2019/S32-39]

The interview above states "the principal is always here". This is the strength of the principal's attribute as a source of reference for the teachers. The principal is always in school. Her presence saves any wrong decision by teachers from happening. For instance, the informant expresses "we have to inform her even if it is small", showing just how vital the principal's role is when dealing with students' personality issues. This finding refers to the disciplinary action that requires any decision to be referred to the principal. Discipline matters are the most complicated education agenda to overcome. Hence, wisdom in a principal's leadership to deal with this problem deserves high regard.

### **Solidarity Attributes**

Among the solidarity attributes detected through the principal's leadership is a performance-oriented person. The principal is visionary, practices enculturation and ensures that student outcomes are achieved. Solidarity attributes refer to attributes focusing on love for country. In the case school, the principal was found to be an educational leader with vision. She prioritizes achievement. The principal voices her concern that leadership built on personality will not impinge on the goals of education. The nation's education system needs leaders with solidarity attributes who will stand up to the global challenges and digital revolution.

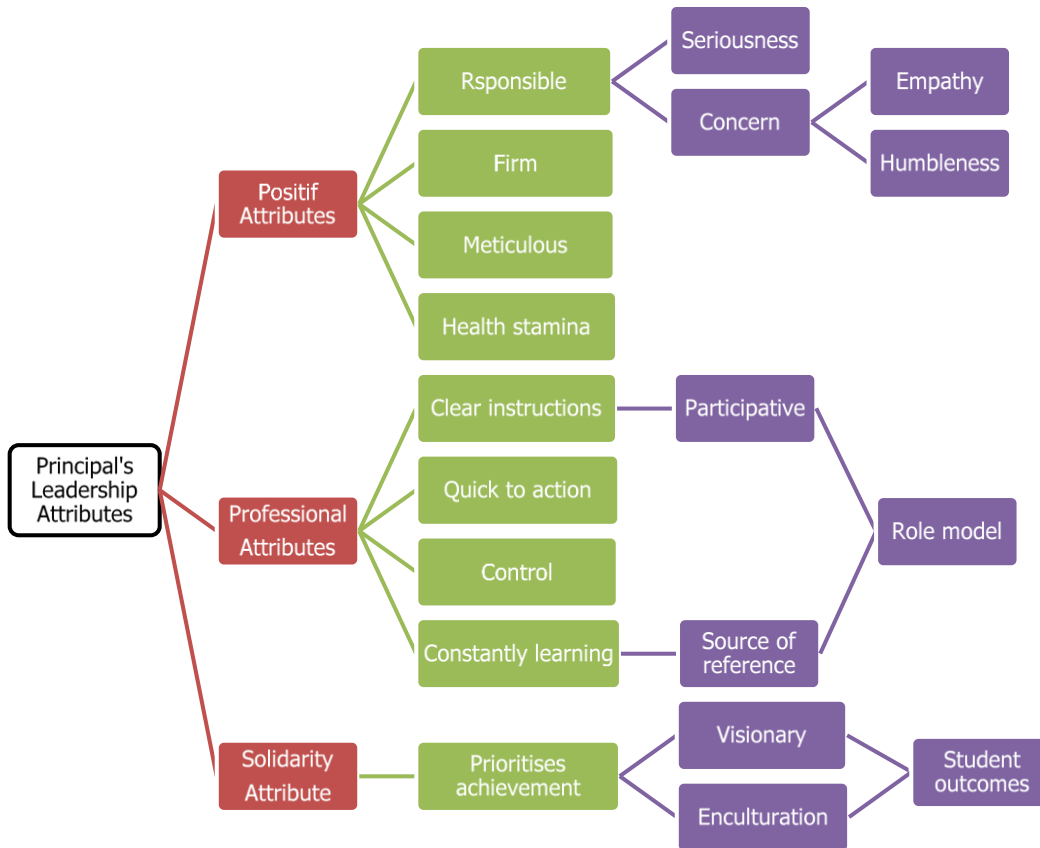
For the researcher, this attribute is a clue towards creating success stemming from the principal's character referred as 'wholehearted'. Observe the interview below:

*Oo apa yang saya nampak arr..satu puan Jen macam cikgu nyatakan tadi dia kecil tapi semangat dia tu..walaupun cakap mustahil..mesti buat dia sangat semangat dan mesti boleh.Ya..sangat tinggi..terasa mahu ikut.Ya begitu..memanglah mendorong. Mungkin kekangan masa ,dia ini sedaya upaya menginginkan.*

Oo...what I notice is... one, Madam Jen as you mentioned earlier she is small but her passion... even if you say impossible.. she must do she is very passionate and will make it happen. Yes..very intense..we feel like following. Yes like that..very compelling. Perhaps due to time constraints, she wholeheartedly desires.

[TB/Infr7/11.11.2019/S14-16]

A principal’s wholistic leadership is greatly beneficial for human capital development. This finding is interesting. This finding is interesting when met with the discovery of a sustainable principal’s leadership that can face social challenges. A far-sighted principal has surely planned her school’s success. Based on the findings, a model for principals’ leadership has been developed.



**Figure 2 : Model of Attributes in a Principal’s Leadership**

**4. Discussion and conclusion**

The attributes of a leader significantly influences the leadership of principals in administrating schools effectively (Kemal M. Surji, 2015). Successful principals are often associated with the positive attributes they possess (Over B.J 2015). Based on Norhannan Ramli’s (2017) study which advocates that leadership is closely related to character, behaviour, and qualities of a leader, it can be explained that the qualities of a leader will be evaluated by the attributes displayed in their physical and intelligence outlook.

According to the theory that this study is based on, it can also be explained that the effective attributes of a leader as found in this study can be narrowed down to the positive attributes of responsibility (Lai Nah Poh, Tai Mei Kin dan Omar Abdul Kareem, 2019). A responsible leader would not leave his/her followers to fulfil tasks alone. it was found that the case school saw plenty of its principal’s involvement in its activities and programmes. Such attributes essentially differentiate leaders from followers.

The findings of this study show that a principal with attributes will be able to solve problems in school through the positive, professional, and solidarity attributes. Hence this finding has brought to the discovery that personal disposition of attributes in a principal’s leadership is an important supporting element of leadership. This finding is in line with previous researchers and answers the research questions. However, there is a new discovery on the attribute of meticulousness. Based on this finding, the researcher learns that this attribute should rightfully be the most important focus in leadership.



A principal's leadership and natural attributes are both vital in ensuring the effectiveness and success of a school. Empirical studies have proved that natural attributes do affect a principal's leadership. Andrew Thomas Ujil and Christina Andin (2018) explain that high performance leaders are capable of driving students' performance. A leader ought to possess a greater positive attitude, be bolder, and be more enduring than his/her followers. (Ebrahim Hassan Al Khajeh, 2018). This means that anyone destined to be a leader should have greater endurance and the ability to accept and face risks or failure. A leader needs to be capable of predicting and communicating with authority and wisdom. More so, this leader will be receptive to diverse methods to plan the goals of the organisation under his/her charge.

In general, the theory of *The Great Man* concedes that empirical studies prove that a principal's success in managing a school has a positive relationship with the attributes possessed by a leader. In theory this finding supports the theory that forms the basis of the theoretical framework mentioned. Thus, the selection of future principals should be accorded emphasis on the aspects of personality disposition to ensure those selected possess attributes reflective of high-quality personality in the efforts to create effective educational leaders.

The success of a school is deeply rooted in the principal's leadership. A principal's effective personal disposition is driven by strong natural attributes. This study has proven that strong attributes will positively influence the principal's leadership in school. Principals who possess strong attributes will change the school landscape to become as desired the Ministry of Education of Malaysia, as envisioned in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

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