Excellent Leadership in Sustaining Accredited Excellence: A Multi-Site Case Study of Public High Schools in Jakarta

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ABSTRACT

In Indonesia, public high schools that achieve "A" accreditation status are often regarded as models of educational excellence. However, sustaining this accredited excellence poses significant challenges due to shifting policies, growing complexity in school management, and the demand for continuous innovation. This study investigates how excellent leadership is practiced by principals of accredited excellent public high schools in Jakarta to sustain institutional quality over time. Using a qualitative multi-site case study design, data were collected from five senior high schools that have consistently maintained "A" accreditation status. The primary participants were school principals, supported by vice principals, senior teachers, and administrative staff. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, non-participatory observations, and document analysis, with triangulation applied to ensure validity and trustworthiness. The findings reveal five interrelated dimensions of excellent leadership: (1) visionary and strategic leadership, (2) integrity and ethical role modeling, (3) collaborative and capacity-building leadership, (4) adaptive and systemic thinking, and (5) accountability and continuous improvement. These dimensions collectively demonstrate how principals not only comply with accreditation requirements but also embed sustainable practices that foster institutional resilience, teacher empowerment, and cultural legitimacy. The study concludes that sustaining accredited excellence requires leadership that is ethically grounded, strategically visionary, and adaptively systemic, supported by collaborative capacity-building and a culture of continuous improvement. Theoretically, the research contributes to leadership studies by conceptualizing *excellent leadership* as a synthesis of ethical, transformational, and distributed approaches. Practically, it highlights actionable strategies for policymakers, school leaders, and supervisory bodies to strengthen leadership capacity in sustaining school excellence.

Keywords: Excellent leadership; School principals; Accredited excellence; Ethical leadership; Jakarta; Case study

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INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia's national education system, school accreditation functions as a critical benchmark of institutional quality and public accountability. The highest accreditation status, labeled "A" or *unggul*, reflects a school's compliance with national education standards and its excellence in governance, curriculum implementation, human resource management, learning outcomes, and school culture (BAN-S/M, 2022). For many public senior high schools (SMA Negeri) in Jakarta, achieving this status is a significant milestone an institutional affirmation of quality and competitiveness.

However, the challenge does not lie solely in attaining excellence but in sustaining it over time. As Jakarta continues to evolve into a hyper-competitive and rapidly changing urban education ecosystem, schools face mounting pressure to adapt to shifting curricula, digital transformation, teacher quality expectations, and performance-based evaluations. According to data from the National Accreditation Board (BAN-S/M), between 2019 and 2022, several previously accredited excellent schools in Jakarta experienced a decline in accreditation scores during re-evaluation cycles. This decline suggests that maintaining accredited excellence is a dynamic and continuous process, not a one-time administrative achievement.

Moreover, school excellence is not merely about fulfilling technical standards. It also encompasses institutional resilience, adaptive management, and sustainable leadership capacity. The complexity of maintaining excellence involves leading through innovation, navigating policy changes, sustaining staff morale, and consistently delivering high educational outcomes. This requires more than compliance; it calls for strategic and excellent leadership.

In this regard, the role of the principal becomes pivotal. The school principal is not only an administrator but also a strategic leader, a moral compass, a systems thinker, and a culture builder. While some schools succeed in maintaining excellence through strong leadership, others falter due to leadership that lacks continuity, strategic foresight, or engagement.

Within this context, the concept of excellent leadership becomes particularly relevant. Excellent leadership refers to a form of leadership that not only drives short-term performance but also ensures long-term institutional excellence. It encompasses the capacity to formulate and communicate a compelling vision, make ethically grounded decisions, build cohesive and high-performing teams, adapt to complex environments, and embed a culture of quality throughout the organization (Hopkins et al., 2006; Kiral, 2020).

Although often overlapping with transformational and ethical leadership, excellent leadership integrates these characteristics with a strong orientation toward sustainable impact, systemic capacity building, and strategic accountability. In high-performing schools, especially those under public scrutiny like in Jakarta, such leadership is not optional, but it is essential.

This study, therefore, is grounded in the real-world phenomenon of schools grappling with the demands of sustaining accreditation in a complex, high-stakes environment. It seeks to illuminate how school principals demonstrate excellent leadership in navigating these demands, and what dimensions of leadership behaviour contribute most to sustaining accredited excellence.

A considerable body of research in educational leadership has documented the influence of various leadership styles—such as transformational, instructional, and ethical leadership on school performance and teacher motivation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Hallinger, 2011; Ko et al., 2018). These studies have provided valuable insights into how leaders can inspire change, drive learning outcomes, and build school capacity.

However, despite these contributions, several key gaps remain, particularly in the context of schools that have already achieved high levels of institutional performance, such as those holding "A" or *unggul* accreditation. While much of the existing research focuses on leadership for *school improvement*, there is a lack of inquiry into leadership that supports *institutional sustainability* i.e., how leadership helps schools maintain high performance over time, not merely reach it.

Furthermore, the concept of "excellent leadership" remains underdeveloped in the literature. Though often referenced interchangeably with transformational or strategic leadership, excellent leadership can be conceptualized as a more integrated construct. It involves not only the capacity to set direction and influence others, but also the ability to build sustainable systems, foster ethical culture, develop collective efficacy, and navigate institutional complexity (Hopkins et al., 2006; Kiral, 2020). Few studies have examined how

these integrated leadership traits manifest in real school settings, especially in the post-accreditation phase where the focus shifts from transformation to sustainability.

In the Indonesian context, research on school leadership often concentrates on administrative competence or leadership for improvement in underperforming schools (e.g., Mukhtar et al., 2018; Riski et al., 2021). Less attention is paid to what makes leadership effective in high-performing, already-accredited schools, and even fewer studies explore how such leadership evolves to meet the ongoing demands of quality assurance systems and public expectations.

Additionally, most accreditation-related studies in Indonesia emphasize compliance with documentation and indicators rather than the underlying leadership processes that enable those standards to be met and sustained. The human, strategic, and cultural dimensions of sustaining excellence particularly the practices of school principals which are rarely the central focus.

This creates a dual-layered gap:

1. Theoretical gap: A lack of clear conceptualization and operationalization of *excellent leadership* as a leadership model distinct from yet complementary to existing styles.
2. Empirical gap: A lack of qualitative, context-rich research investigating how excellent leadership is practiced in schools that are not striving to improve from mediocrity, but are striving to remain excellent.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating how excellent leadership is enacted by principals of public high schools in Jakarta that have consistently maintained top-tier accreditation. By focusing on leadership in the *maintenance* phase of excellence, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of sustainable leadership practices in high-performing school environments.

Grounded in the gaps identified above, this study aims to explore how excellent leadership is conceptualized and practiced by principals of accredited excellent public high schools in Jakarta, particularly in their efforts to sustain institutional quality over time. The research seeks to identify the specific leadership behaviors, strategies, and values that contribute to the ongoing maintenance of high accreditation standards in the face of policy shifts, organizational complexity, and evolving educational demands. In doing so, this study addresses the following core question: How do public high school principals in Jakarta practice excellent leadership to sustain their schools' accredited excellence?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative multi-site case study design to explore the implementation of excellent leadership among public high school principals in Jakarta. The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth investigation of leadership behaviors, meanings, and strategies within their real-life contexts. A multi-site case study allowed for comparison across schools that share the same accreditation status but operate in diverse socio-administrative environments. This design is appropriate for examining complex, context-bound phenomena such as sustaining accredited excellence through leadership.

This study was conducted in five public senior high schools (*SMA Negeri*) located across different administrative regions of Jakarta, including Central, West, East, South, and North Jakarta. These schools were selected through purposive sampling based on their consistent achievement of the highest accreditation status ("A" or *unggul*) for at least two consecutive evaluation cycles. In addition to meeting this institutional benchmark, each school demonstrated stable academic performance and innovation in school management practices. Another key criterion for site selection was the leadership profile of each school principal, specifically those who had served in their position for a minimum of two years and had been publicly recognized for exemplary leadership, either at the local or national level.

The primary participants in this study were the five school principals, who served as key informants due to their central role in strategic decision-making and institutional leadership. To strengthen the validity of the findings through source triangulation, additional supporting informants were also engaged. These included vice principals responsible for curriculum or student affairs, senior teachers with extensive institutional experience, and school administrative staff involved in quality assurance processes. These multiple perspectives helped enrich the data and provided a more comprehensive understanding of how excellent leadership was practiced and perceived within each school setting.

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Data for this study were collected using a combination of three qualitative techniques: in-depth interviews, non-participatory observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five school principals, allowing for both consistency in core questions and flexibility to probe deeper into context-specific leadership practices. The interviews explored themes such as leadership vision, team building, problem-solving, decision-making, and strategies used to sustain accreditation excellence.

To complement the interview data, non-participatory observations were carried out during school activities such as internal meetings, daily briefings, and leadership routines. These observations helped capture the behavioral dynamics of leadership as they unfolded in real-time, offering insight into how principals interacted with staff, made decisions, and responded to emerging issues.

In addition, document analysis was performed on key school records, including accreditation reports, strategic plans, internal quality assurance documentation, and leadership evaluation records. These documents served as objective artifacts to triangulate reported practices and verify leadership strategies linked to sustaining accreditation standards.

To ensure the credibility and rigor of the study, multiple strategies were employed to enhance validity and trustworthiness. Triangulation was applied across both data sources and data collection methods. This included comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documents, as well as cross-checking perspectives from different stakeholders such as principals, vice principals, and teachers. The convergence of information across these sources helped confirm the authenticity of emerging themes.

Member checking was also conducted, wherein selected participants reviewed and validated preliminary interpretations of their interviews. This process allowed for corrections, clarifications, and additional insights, thereby strengthening the accuracy of the data. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process to document key decisions, analytical procedures, and reflections, ensuring transparency and dependability in the analysis. Additionally, the researcher practiced reflexivity to remain aware of personal biases and assumptions that could influence interpretation.

Data analysis was carried out using the thematic approach guided by the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (2014). The process began with data reduction, which involved coding the transcribed interviews and organizing observational and document data into meaningful categories. These codes were then clustered into initial themes that represented recurring patterns of leadership practice across the five schools.

Following this, data display was conducted using thematic matrices that allowed for both within-case and cross-case comparisons. These displays helped the researcher identify similarities, differences, and unique strategies in leadership across the research sites. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn and verified through iterative reflection, comparison with the research framework, and validation from the triangulated data sources. The goal of the analysis was to distill a set of core dimensions that characterized excellent leadership in the context of sustaining accredited school excellence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study identified several core dimensions of *excellent leadership* that were consistently practiced by school principals in sustaining their schools' accredited excellence. These dimensions emerged across multiple sites and were validated through triangulated data. Each dimension reflects a leadership behavior or mindset that contributes significantly to maintaining high institutional performance in dynamic and demanding school environments.

Table 1: *Leadership Dimension*

No.	Leadership Dimension	Core Practices Observed	Outcome for Sustained Excellence
1	**Visionary and Strategic Leadership**	Collaborative goal-setting, alignment of planning with vision, responsiveness to trends	Institutional direction, clarity of purpose, long-term focus

No.	Leadership Dimension	Core Practices Observed	Outcome for Sustained Excellence
2	**Integrity and Ethical Role Modeling**	Consistent behavior, fairness in decisions, transparency, accountability to staff and students	Trust, legitimacy, ethical culture
3	**Collaborative and Capacity-Building Leadership**	Empowering teacher teams, shared decision-making, structured professional learning	Strong team ownership, improved teacher competence
4	**Adaptive and Systemic Thinking**	Agile program adjustments, scenario planning, integration across systems	Organizational resilience, innovation readiness
5	**Accountability and Continuous Improvement**	Internal audits, data-driven reflection, performance reviews with follow-up	Sustainable quality assurance, culture of reflection and improvement

Visionary and Strategic Leadership

All five principals in this study demonstrated a strong orientation toward long-term institutional development by articulating and operationalizing strategic visions. This visionary and strategic leadership was evident not only in formal planning documents but also in the principals' day-to-day discourse, routines, and decision-making patterns.

For instance, the principal of School JT emphasized that every academic year began with a joint goal-setting session involving teachers and vice principals. He stated, *"Kami menyusun rencana kerja tahunan dengan melibatkan semua unsur. Visi sekolah itu bukan milik kepala sekolah saja, tapi komitmen bersama."* Similarly, at School JS, the principal frequently referred to the school's strategic plan (*RKJM*) during internal meetings and aligned annual priorities with long-term goals in student achievement, teacher development, and digital learning. These patterns indicate a clear effort to institutionalize vision, not just articulate it.

The document analysis supports these observations. Strategic planning documents (RKJM and RKS) from Schools JP and JU showed continuity in school goals across multiple accreditation cycles, including indicators related to innovation, academic performance, and service quality. In the case of School JB, the principal explicitly embedded the school's motto and values into all program components, such as extracurricular planning and character-building initiatives.

This data reveals that visionary leadership among these principals was not abstract or ceremonial. Instead, it was embedded in structures and routines that guided school operations. Rather than leading reactively based on compliance with accreditation standards, principals proactively shaped school directions and adapted those strategies to emerging educational demands.

These findings align with Hopkins et al. (2006), who argue that visionary school leaders are those who not only define institutional direction but also integrate it into organizational learning and continuous improvement. The practice of connecting school vision with planning, team engagement, and performance targets reflects what Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) describe as transformational clarity—the ability to translate abstract goals into concrete action across the organization.

In conclusion, visionary and strategic leadership among the principals studied manifests through collaborative planning, alignment between vision and program implementation, and long-term thinking embedded in daily school practices. This dimension is a key component of excellent leadership in sustaining accredited excellence, as it provides direction, coherence, and adaptive focus amidst changing policy and social contexts.

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Integrity and Ethical Role Modeling

A second key dimension consistently identified across the five case sites was the principals' demonstration of personal integrity and ethical leadership in everyday practices. Principals not only enforced ethical standards but also modeled them in their own behavior, thereby shaping the moral culture of their schools.

Interview data show that the principal of School JP emphasized the importance of consistency between words and actions: *"Saya tidak mungkin menegur guru soal disiplin kalau saya sendiri tidak disiplin. Saya harus jadi contoh dulu."* Similarly, the principal of School JU stated that transparency and fairness were non-negotiable: *"Keputusan apapun harus bisa saya pertanggungjawabkan ke guru dan ke siswa. Saya selalu sampaikan alasan dan prosesnya secara terbuka."*

This ethical posture was confirmed through observational data. In School JB, the principal was seen openly acknowledging a mistake during a school coordination meeting and inviting staff to suggest better alternatives. In School JS, decision-making forums, such as team-leader meetings, were conducted with visible efforts to hear diverse voices and avoid favoritism. Teachers in multiple schools acknowledged that their principals were seen as fair, honest, and reliable, fostering a sense of psychological safety and trust.

Document analysis also supported this theme. In Schools JT and JU, minutes of leadership meetings included records of ethical discussions, such as responses to conflicts of interest, fairness in performance appraisals, and considerations of student wellbeing in disciplinary matters. These documents suggest that ethical deliberation was an institutional norm, not a personal exception.

These findings are consistent with the concept of moral modeling in ethical leadership literature. Treviño et al. (2003) argue that ethical leadership involves both being a "moral person" and a "moral manager", someone who not only behaves ethically but also uses organizational mechanisms to reinforce ethical conduct. Similarly, Resick et al. (2013) found that perceived leader integrity significantly predicts organizational justice and citizenship behavior.

In the context of sustaining accredited excellence, ethical leadership contributes to institutional trust, professional culture, and fairness in governance, all of which are critical for maintaining accreditation performance over time.

In conclusion, principals across the case schools played an active role as ethical role models by aligning their behavior with school values, promoting transparency, and embodying fairness in interactions. This integrity-based leadership not only strengthened school culture but also contributed to the long-term legitimacy and credibility of the institution, both essential in sustaining excellence.

Collaborative and Capacity-Building Leadership

Another essential dimension of excellent leadership identified in this study is the principal's ability to foster collaboration and systematically build the capacity of school personnel. Across all five schools, principals played a central role in shaping collegiality, empowering staff, and promoting ongoing professional learning.

The principal of School JU described a philosophy of leadership that emphasized shared responsibility: *"Saya tidak bisa kerja sendiri. Semua guru saya ajak untuk menyusun program. Mereka yang paling tahu apa yang dibutuhkan di kelas."* Similarly, in School JT, the principal actively involved teacher teams in curriculum review and student development programs, stating that *"pembangunan mutu harus dimulai dari guru yang berkembang."*

Observational data reinforced these statements. In School JS, the principal chaired a regular *forum kolaboratif guru*, where teachers presented classroom innovations and reflected on lesson outcomes. In School JB, the principal regularly facilitated professional learning sessions not as an instructor, but as a co-learner—joining teachers in analyzing lesson study data and adjusting teaching strategies together.

The document analysis also revealed structured initiatives to build teacher capacity. School JP's annual program included budget allocations for workshops, mentoring for novice teachers, and peer coaching. Furthermore, several schools embedded collaborative language into their quality assurance systems, using terms like *tim kerja mutu*, *komunitas belajar*, and *penguatan kompetensi internal* in their planning documents.

These findings align with the principles of distributed leadership (Harris, 2008), where leadership is not centralized in the principal alone, but is intentionally shared among teachers, teams, and middle managers. In line with Leithwood et al. (2020), capacity-building leadership enhances not only individual skills but also institutional resilience, vital for sustaining excellence under changing educational demands.

Moreover, the emphasis on collaboration reflects the shift from a top-down to a learning-centered leadership model, in which school improvement is seen as a collective process driven by empowered educators (Hallinger, 2011).

In conclusion, collaborative and capacity-building leadership among Jakarta's excellent school principals' manifests in inclusive decision-making, structured professional learning, and empowerment of teacher teams. This leadership dimension ensures that school excellence is not solely dependent on the principal, but becomes embedded in the collective agency and professionalism of the entire school community.

Adaptive and Systemic Thinking

In sustaining accredited excellence, the ability of school principals to think adaptively and manage complexity systemically emerged as a critical leadership trait. Principals in this study did not rely on static strategies or procedural routines but demonstrated responsiveness to change, contextual awareness, and a systemic approach to school governance.

During interviews, the principal of School JS explained that sustaining excellence requires agility: *"Kondisi tiap tahun berbeda. Tugas saya memastikan sistem sekolah mampu beradaptasi, bukan cuma bertahan."* This statement reflects a proactive rather than reactive orientation to leadership. Likewise, the principal of School JB highlighted the need to adjust school programs in response to changes in national assessment policies and digital learning demands. Rather than resisting change, he mobilized teacher task forces to redesign teaching models and student evaluations.

Observational data confirmed this adaptive mindset. In School JU, the principal initiated a mid-year review process to assess program implementation and revise targets based on real-time feedback. Rather than waiting for annual reports or external audits, the leadership team used rapid cycles of reflection and adjustment. Similarly, in School JP, internal coordination meetings often included scenario planning to anticipate upcoming policy shifts or budget constraints.

Document analysis showed clear evidence of systemic thinking. Several schools, including JT and JU, used integrated planning tools that linked school goals, teacher development programs, student support systems, and budget allocations in a unified framework. These strategic documents indicated that principals did not treat programs in isolation but approached school leadership as an interdependent system.

These findings align with what Fullan (2005) terms as "systems thinking in action" a leadership mindset that views change not as a disruption but as an opportunity for institutional learning and redesign. Adaptive leaders cultivate organizational flexibility while maintaining focus on long-term values and goals.

Moreover, this dimension reflects what Heifetz and Linsky (2002) describe as adaptive leadership, where the principal works with the school community to diagnose challenges, mobilize learning, and adjust systems to meet evolving demands.

In conclusion, adaptive and systemic thinking enables principals to sustain school excellence by ensuring strategic alignment, institutional responsiveness, and capacity for continuous recalibration. This leadership dimension protects accredited status not only by preserving compliance but also by building resilience into the school's operational fabric.

Accountability and Continuous Improvement

This final dimension captures how principals ensured that school excellence was not only achieved, but consistently evaluated, refined, and sustained. Across all five research sites, principals demonstrated a strong sense of institutional accountability both to internal stakeholders and external standards while embedding a culture of continuous improvement within their schools.

Interview data revealed that principals saw accountability as more than just fulfilling accreditation documentation. The principal of School JT, for instance, stated, *"Akreditasi itu bukan soal administrasi. Itu cerminan dari apa yang benar-benar kita jalankan di lapangan. Setiap guru harus bisa menunjukkan*

kinerjanya, dan saya juga." In School JU, the principal described how they used school self-evaluation tools not only as compliance instruments but as tools for professional reflection and program refinement.

This perspective was supported by observational data. In School JS, the principal led routine data-sharing sessions where academic achievement trends, classroom observations, and feedback from student surveys were discussed openly among staff. This transparency reflected a climate of collective responsibility, not blame. In School JB, program evaluations were conducted in mid-year and end-of-year cycles, with documented follow-up actions a practice indicative of institutional learning.

Document analysis further revealed structured quality assurance mechanisms. Schools JP and JU, for example, had internal audit teams that regularly reviewed not only budget and facilities but also teaching effectiveness, co-curricular programs, and student support systems. These audits were not ceremonial; the follow-up reports contained action points, timelines, and person-in-charge designations.

The data support existing literature on internal accountability as a driver of sustainable school improvement (Elmore, 2004; Marjuki et al., 2018). Rather than relying solely on external evaluations, these principals institutionalized routines for self-monitoring and adaptation. Their leadership reflects what DuFour et al. (2016) refer to as professional learning communities with a results orientation, where staff continuously ask: What are we doing well? What needs to improve? How do we measure progress?

Moreover, the emphasis on evidence-based reflection aligns with the concept of continuous school renewal (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006), which sees sustainability not as preserving the status quo but as evolving in response to changing needs and standards.

In conclusion, accountability and continuous improvement serve as the institutional backbone of excellent leadership. By embedding transparent evaluation systems and promoting a reflective culture, principals ensure that excellence is not episodic or symbolic but embedded in the school's everyday work. This dimension reinforces sustained accreditation by making improvement an ongoing expectation, not a temporary project.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study set out to explore how principals in accredited excellent public high schools in Jakarta practice *excellent leadership* to sustain their institutional excellence. Findings from the multi-site case study revealed five interrelated dimensions of excellent leadership: (1) Visionary and Strategic Leadership, (2) Integrity and Ethical Role Modeling, (3) Collaborative and Capacity-Building Leadership, (4) Adaptive and Systemic Thinking, and (5) Accountability and Continuous Improvement. Together, these dimensions form a comprehensive framework through which principals not only maintain but also renew and strengthen their schools' accredited excellence over time.

Figure 1: Leadership Dimension

The findings confirm that sustaining excellence requires more than procedural compliance with accreditation indicators. Instead, it depends on the principal's ability to articulate and translate vision into strategic action, embody ethical values in daily leadership, empower teachers and teams, adapt proactively to change, and embed accountability systems that support ongoing improvement. These practices indicate that excellent leadership is integrative and dynamic, operating at the intersection of values, strategy, collaboration, and systemic responsiveness.

The implications of this study are twofold. Theoretically, it contributes to the refinement of leadership studies by conceptualizing *excellent leadership* as distinct from yet complementary to transformational, ethical, and distributed leadership models. It offers an empirically grounded framework that integrates these perspectives within the specific context of sustaining accredited excellence. Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for policymakers, school supervisors, and principals themselves. For policymakers, strengthening training programs that emphasize visionary, ethical, and adaptive leadership can ensure school sustainability. For school leaders, building structures for collaboration, transparency, and continuous reflection is crucial to maintaining excellence amidst evolving demands.

Ultimately, sustaining excellence is not a static achievement but a continuous process of renewal. This study underscores the importance of leadership practices that are ethically grounded, strategically visionary, collaborative in nature, and systematically adaptive, making them indispensable for schools that aim to remain not only accredited but truly excellent.

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