

Exploring Participative Leadership Among Principals: A Quantitative Study on Teachers' Perceptions in Sabah, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine secondary teachers' perceptions of participative leadership among principals in Sabah. It aimed to determine if (1) there were any significant differences in teachers' perceptions of participative leadership among principals by way of gender, age, and job experience, (2) there were any significant differences in perceived participative leadership based on a hypothetical value of 3.5, and (3) the descriptive statistics related to perceived participative leadership among principals. The sample comprised 63 teachers who completed the Participative Decision-Making dimension of the Empowering Leadership Questionnaire on Google Forms. Data were subsequently transferred onto a spreadsheet and analyzed using SPSS 26.0. First, Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed nonsignificant differences in teachers' perceptions of participative leadership by way of age and job experience, while Mann-Whitney U test showed nonsignificant differences in terms of gender. Second, Wilcoxon signed rank test showed that four of the items were significant at $p < 0.001$ based on a hypothesized value of 3.5. Third, findings indicated a moderate level of perceived participative leadership among principals, suggesting that participative practices are present, but not yet deeply institutionalized in secondary schools. In light of the findings, some recommendations were made on how principals could incorporate participative leadership into their daily school management.

Contribution/Originality: This research offers a valuable contribution by examining teachers' perceptions of participative leadership among principals in the Bornean state. Moreover, there is a research gap on participative leadership in the Malaysian educational milieu; therefore, this study serves to narrow the gap, while underscoring that teachers can benefit from participative leadership because it promotes teamwork, raises their morale, and helps improve teaching and learning outcomes.

1. Introduction

Participative leadership is based on a team-based approach that allows all staff in the organization to express their views on how things should operate. Involving all staff in decision-making instils a sense of belonging, especially when the decisions can affect their daily lives. It not only reduces turnover and absenteeism, but also reminds staff to adhere to their decisions, thus ensuring that they are being successfully implemented. Additionally, participative leadership often leads to higher morale and creative thinking. It supports staff wellbeing by encouraging them to assume an active role in the organization. Being inclusive, it makes them feel more than just a cog in a wheel, thus motivating them to actively engage in organizational policy, besides experiencing greater job motivation and pride. By promoting creative problem-solving, participative leadership enables the management to make pragmatic decisions that often leads to cost-saving innovations, which in turn, increases productivity and efficiency ([Western Governors University, 2021](#)).

Additionally, participative leadership is greatly influenced by the human motivation theory. Instead of adopting a hierarchical approach to managing a team, participative leaders try to engage every staff in making important decisions related to organizational problems, issues, or challenges. Since their approach tends to be democratic rather than authoritarian, they allow every staff to voice their opinions concerning the day-to-day management of the organization. By involving everyone in decision-making and work processes, participative leaders enhance staff self-esteem, sense of belonging, and morale, which ultimately satisfies the human need for self-actualization ([Western Governors University, 2021](#)).

Lastly, participative leadership involves three basic stages. First, through consensus decision-making, it encourages staff to make organization-wide decisions through voting. While the leaders may facilitate the discussions, ultimately, a unified agreement is essential to move things forward. Second, through collective leadership, participative leaders ensure that all staff in the organization have the opportunity to collaborate; staff across the organization make decisions as a team with equal accountability. Third, while adopting democratic principles, participative leaders make the final decision after considering all staff's input on key issues, problems, or challenges ([Western Governors University, 2021](#)).

1.1. Benefits of Participative Leadership

While driving growth in an organization, participative leadership helps improve occupational habits and work ethic ([International Institute for Management Development, 2025](#)). Participative principals can obtain useful feedback to conceptualize unprecedented ideas, besides fostering a culture of respect and collaboration. By valuing each staff's input, they cultivate an academic environment that

welcomes diverse perspectives and inclusivity, which not only promotes innovative problem-solving, but also staff enthusiasm and engagement. Further, participative principals make staff feel appreciated, which leads to higher self-esteem, job satisfaction, and morale. Moreover, principals who adopt a participative style also enhance their own interpersonal skills through active listening, empathy, and effective communication, which in turn, facilitates their team management and conflict resolution skills. Lastly, by demonstrating respect for staff's ideas, they inculcate trust and loyalty amongst them, which ultimately yields favorable teaching and learning outcomes.

Career-wise, participative leaders can develop better decision-making and problem-solving skills ([International Institute for Management Development, 2025](#)). By involving staff members in the decision-making process, principals can obtain a broad array of ideas, perspectives, and solutions, which helps them derive innovative solutions to address issues and overcome challenges. Moreover, this inclusive approach enables them to mitigate risks more effectively because solutions or decisions are grounded on multiple perspectives and consensus. Furthermore, principals can benefit from participative because it increases their ability to delegate tasks, leverage the strengths of their staff, and propagate a productive organizational culture as motivators, visionary guides, and facilitators to empower and delegate staff, promote strategic thinking, make moral-ethical choices, and drive adaptability and innovation to achieve educational goals.

1.2. Attributes of Participative Principals

Participative leadership is an effective management style because it promotes active staff engagement, creativity, and morale ([International Institute for Management Development, 2025](#)). First, participative principals encourage active engagement instead of making all significant decisions by themselves. To help their schools reach greater heights, they facilitate greater engagement amongst all staff members. Further, participative principals keep staff actively involved and make them feel appreciated. They reinforce the notion that every part of the school matters, and that each staff possesses unique skills and value. By ensuring that staff are contributing to collaborative discussions, participative principals make them become more passionate about the school, more self-assertive in their roles, and more aligned with the school's mission and vision.

Second, creativity is valuable for any school, and participative principals promote it more than other leadership styles ([International Institute for Management Development, 2025](#)). By being receptive of staff's ideas and suggestions, participative principals can increase their understanding of their school to develop new, innovative teaching and learning strategies. By permitting all staff member to share their ideas and contribute to the decision-making process, participative principals will have a broad range of creative ideas to practice efficient problem-solving, while always having different alternatives to grow their school. Third, schools can benefit from participative leadership because it improves morale by instilling a sense of belonging amongst staff. By keeping staff motivated and excited about their work, participative principals are able to increase staff retention rates, while planning for the long-term future of their school. By boosting staff morale, participative principals propagate a close-knit community, which makes staff feel included and guided through teamwork and open communication.

Lastly, principals can become more participative by implementing participative leadership methods, opening collaboration, and discussions ([International Institute for Management Development, 2025](#)). First, by encouraging reciprocal communication, they can promote collaboration amongst staff, who are free to share their ideas without fear or judgment. To transition staff into participative leadership, principals can commence by soliciting opinions and ideas through anonymous surveys to assess staff's perceptions of various aspects of the organization. Further, by practicing opening collaboration, principals can create online or offline environments that allow diverse individuals or teams to freely share ideas, skills, and resources for innovation, problem-solving, or content creation. Lastly, by overseeing discussions without influencing them, principals let staff know that their ideas and opinions are essential to the school's overall success.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

Participative leadership is a democratic leadership style that involves staff in decision-making and implementing their input to encourage collaboration, empowerment, open communication, inclusiveness, flexibility, and responsibility-sharing ([Western Governors University, 2021](#)). A literature review indicated that empirical research on participative leadership is lacking in Sabah, Malaysia. It is important to investigate perceived participative leadership in the Bornean state to determine the extent to which school principals engage teachers in decision-making to get diverse perspectives for effective problem-solving, besides making them feel valued personally and professionally. The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of participative leadership among principals in Sabah, Malaysia.

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for the following reasons. First, findings can contribute to theoretical understanding of participative leadership in the limited literature, besides providing pragmatic means for principals to adopt a leadership style that can increase team morale by allowing teachers to voice their opinions and express their suggestions, which in turn, makes them more motivated in, and more engaged with, both curricular and extracurricular activities. Second, findings will encourage principals to promote teamwork by providing teachers with the flexibility to collaborate in terms of goal attainment and planning, which will result in higher morale and more vibrant interpersonal communication. Third, they will inspire principals to uncover creative solutions by encouraging a free-flowing exchange of ideas that often leads to innovative solutions. Lastly, they will provide a framework for principals to improve teacher retention by fostering an environment that makes staff feel genuinely valued, besides providing room for them to grow and implement innovative ideas to enhance teaching and learning outcomes.

1.5. Research questions

With the establishment of the problem statement, conceptual gap, and research significance, the following research questions were formulated to guide the current study:

- i. Are there any significant differences in teachers' perceptions of participative leadership among principals by way of gender, age and job experience?

- ii. Are there any significant differences in teachers' perceptions of participative leadership among principals based on a hypothetical value of 3.5?
- iii. What are the descriptive statistics related to teachers' perceptions of participative leadership among principals, and what do they imply?

2. Review of Literature

A literature review was conducted as an integral part of the study; it serves as a compass that guides the writers through the existing landscape of knowledge related to participative leadership. By offering a comprehensive synthesis of prior studies, the literature review unveils critical gaps in research and allows the contextualization of the research problems. Further, it facilitates the construction of a robust theoretical framework, aids in methodological decision-making, and prevents duplication on the leadership construct. This literature review summarizes the impacts of participative leadership on different aspects by abstracting published research and using direct chronology to report secondary findings.

2.1. Impact on Performance and Commitment

In an earlier study, [Godwin-Charles and Harrington \(2009\)](#) scrutinized the impact of participative on the financial performance and strategy implementation in the food sector. Findings showed that food organizations with greater participative leadership tend to achieve significantly more success in strategy implementation, achieve higher overall profitability than those with other types of leadership. On the other hand, the relationship between participative leadership and job performance among interns and their supervisors was examined by [Newman, Rose, and Teo \(2012\)](#). Findings demonstrated that participative leadership tends to significantly influence job performance and affective trust. Lastly, the relationship between participative leadership and intern job performance tends to be partially mediated by affective trust.

The impact of participative and directive leadership on team performance among university administrative staff was researched by [Bell, Dodd, and Mjoli \(2018\)](#). Findings showed that participative leadership tends to significantly affect team effectiveness, implying that it tends to motivate staff to establish more effective work structures and enhance their cognitive processes related to decision-making. Moreover, [Mwaisaka, K'Aol, and Ouma \(2019\)](#), who inquired into the impact of participative leadership on bank employees' job satisfaction, affirmed that participative leadership tends to significantly and positively predict middle-level managers' job satisfaction via organizational decision-making. [Bhatti et al. \(2019\)](#), who probed the impact of participative leadership on organizational citizenship behavior, divulged that both factors tend to be significantly mediated by affective leadership. Additionally, affective trust was found to significantly mediate the relationship between participative leadership and organizational citizenship behavior, while continuous commitment was found to significantly mediate the relationship between participative leadership and organizational citizenship behavior.

The influence of participative leadership style on employees' performance was examined by [Khassawneh and Elrehail \(2022\)](#). Findings revealed a significant and positive relationship between participative leadership and employee loyalty, and employee loyalty and job performance. Finding imply that participative leadership strongly fosters employee loyalty because it fosters empowerment and autonomy

through shared decision-making, which increases staff's sense of control, thus making them feel more capable and independent. By increasing staff's motivation and value, participative leadership makes them feel that their opinions matter, thus boosting their morale and making them more motivated to achieve goals. By allowing staff to internalize organizational goals as their own, participative leadership increases their commitment and loyalty.

Research shows that participative leadership has a favorable effect on staff performance and organizational commitment. [Parnell, Carraher, and Holt \(2002\)](#), who examined the organizational factors that might influence strategic diffusion among service and production employees, found that a participative organizational culture tends to promote greater involvement in strategy formulation. In a study that examined the impact of participative leadership on teachers' empowerment and team innovation at elementary schools, [Somech \(2005\)](#) revealed that participative leadership tends to be significantly related to teachers' empowerment and team innovation. Similarly, [Torlak, Demir, and Budur \(2022\)](#) found that participative decision-making tends to significantly and positively influence educators' perceptions, ethical leadership, and leadership performance, while significantly mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and leadership performance.

On the other hand, [Bakare and Ojeleye \(2020\)](#), who examined the influence of participative leadership on employee commitment among academic and non-academic staff at a technical college, concluded that participative leadership and organizational culture tend to exert a significant impact on employee commitment, implying that higher management should encourage participative leadership to promote psychological attachment and dedication amongst staff. Under participative leadership, staff are likely to be loyal, dedicated, and engaged with their work, thus contributing to a more cohesive organizational culture and improved outcomes. Lastly, [Khassawneh and Elrehail \(2022\)](#), who investigated the impact of participative leadership on managers' performance in relation to the contingent role of institutional theory, revealed a significant and positive relationship between participative leadership and manager loyalty. Lastly, the relationship between the two variables was also found to be significantly and positively moderated by institutional context with fewer constraints.

In their study, [Huang et al. \(2006\)](#) analyzed the influence of participative leadership on public staff's organizational commitment. Findings revealed that participative leadership tends to make staff feel competent, thus increasing their organizational commitment. Findings imply that participative leadership tends to strengthen a psychological bond (positive emotional attachment and a sense of belonging) that reflects staff's identification with, and loyalty to, the organization and its goals. Additionally, the influence of participative and directive leadership on service quality commitment shared customer-oriented values, role clarity, and among bank staff was investigated by [Dolatabadi and Safa \(2011\)](#). Findings indicated participative leadership tends to exert a significant influence on creating shared customer-oriented values and fostering a commitment to service quality within a financial organization. Findings imply that participative leaders, who often involve staff in goal-setting and decision-making, help inculcate a collective understanding and consensus on the importance of the customer experience. Besides, staff who feel heard and valued while defining service standards are more likely to internalize desired professional values and commit to delivering high-quality service.

2.2. Impact on Decision-making

The influence of participative leadership and team climate on joint decision-making, was examined by [Coffeng et al. \(2021\)](#). Findings revealed that participative leadership tends to be significantly related to reflectiveness and decisiveness, implying that participative leaders foster reflectiveness and decisiveness by promoting cooperative trust and goal commitment. Further, [Amos, Siamoo, and Ogoti \(2022\)](#), who inquired into the effect of collective decision-making in participative leadership on improving the quality of education among educators and students from public secondary schools. Findings revealed that collective decision-making tended to be the most crucial strategy of involving teachers and students in participative leadership by encouraging them to resolve the challenges encountered by the education sector. Moreover, principals tended to be more involved in collective decision-making than teachers and students. Findings also showed that collective decision making was affected by top-down leadership based on directive decisions from the highest authority, implying that principals require a clear policy toward implementing collective decision-making among teachers and students.

[Mbua \(2023\)](#) examined the impact of participatory leadership on school management and administration. Findings showed that principals' participatory decision-making tends to be significantly related to teacher effectiveness. Findings imply that teachers' participation in the decision-making process can increase their efficiency, idea generation, job commitment, and accountability. Additionally, participative principals also encourage teachers to actively connect to a shared goal, which has a positive influence on curricular development and academic achievement.

The impact of participative leadership on curriculum decisions at secondary schools was investigated by [Mataboge \(2024\)](#). Findings revealed that participative leadership tends to facilitate inclusive decision-making and promote effective curriculum development because it increases teachers' sense of ownership, curricular relevance, and organizational adaptability. Findings imply that participative leadership increases the teachers' participation in curricular decisions, which makes them feel a greater sense of ownership and accountability, thus leading to more effective implementation. Besides, its inclusive practices ensure that the curriculum reflects diverse perspectives and remains responsive to the needs of the school community. Lastly, participative approaches allow schools to become more agile in responding to changing educational demands and technological advancements.

2.3. Impact on Quality

The impact of participative leadership on the quality of education at public secondary schools was analyzed by [Amos, Ogoti, and Siamoo \(2022\)](#). Findings revealed that shared participative principals tend to formulate a strategic vision to increase teacher involvement in preparing an elaborate school system that (1) enhances academic achievement, (2) provides conducive teaching and learning environment characterized by timely rewards, (3) facilitates the sustainable implementation of education goals through clear objectives for augmenting quality education, (4) facilitates effective monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning process, and (5) increases teacher commitment and efficiency to terms of lesson planning and syllabus completion. Findings imply that, by underscoring a shared strategic vision, participative principals proactively involve teachers in defining and creating organizational goals, turning

abstract ideas into practical, collaborative plans, which in turn, boosts staff commitment, innovation, and performance. Besides, a shared strategic vision also promotes collaborative goal setting, whereby principals facilitate discussions for teachers to help shape the vision and segment it into actionable steps. Lastly, by contributing to the vision, teachers feel a deeper connection and responsibility for improving the quality of education at public secondary schools.

In a survey, [Almutairi \(2024\)](#) assessed participative leadership at secondary schools in relation to institutional quality. Findings showed that participative leadership tends to be significantly and positively related to school excellence by way of authority, decision-making, and interpersonal connections. Findings imply that participative principals often share decision power that makes teachers feel more valued, respected, and empowered, leading to better engagement and commitment to school goals. Their leadership style builds trust, enhances communication, and fosters teamwork, thus creating a positive, supportive culture where staff are more willing to share ideas and help each other. Lastly, by involving teachers in decision-making, participative principals boost their intrinsic motivation, sense of responsibility, and expertise, thus leading to better job performance and innovative problem-solving.

In their study, [Paulus, Zakso, and Rustiyarso \(2024\)](#) investigated the influence of participative leadership on the quality of educational services. Findings indicated that participative leadership tends to significantly influence the quality of educational services in terms of speed, convenience, capabilities, hospitality, and relationships. Findings imply that participative leadership enhances the quality of educational services by involving staff and other stakeholders, which leads to better decisions and higher quality services. It also promotes more favorable educational services by increasing staff motivation and satisfaction, while encouraging shared ideas to drive creative solutions and adaptation to new challenges. Lastly, participative leadership augments educational services by establishing an inclusive school culture grounded on trust, teamwork, and positivity, leading to improved learning outcomes and institutional excellence.

2.4. Impact on Organizational Citizenship, Job Satisfaction, and Work-life Balance

In a study, [Sagnak \(2016\)](#) surveyed the influence of participative leadership on elementary school teachers' intrinsic motivation and organizational citizenship. Findings revealed that participative leadership tends to significantly predict teachers' intrinsic motivation and organizational citizenship. Moreover, intrinsic motivation tends to fully mediate the relationship between participative leadership and organizational citizenship. On the other hand, [Benoliel and Barth \(2017\)](#) examined the relationships among participative leadership, job satisfaction, and occupational exhaustion in relation to school cultural characteristics. Findings revealed that teachers' perceptions of participative leadership tend to be significantly influenced by cultural attributes. Further, significant differences were also found in the effects of participative leadership on occupational exhaustion across schools with different cultural attributes. Findings imply that a school's cultural attributes can significantly influence participative leadership, making it more effective in cultures that value collaboration (clan/collectivist), which in turn, impacts teacher satisfaction, motivation, and innovation by shaping how shared decisions are perceived and implemented.

In an empirical study focusing on the mediating role of respect for staff in the relationship between participative leadership and job satisfaction among university

staff, [Ghaffari et al. \(2017\)](#) found that fair treatment, a dimension of respect for staff, tends to mediate the relationship between the two variables. Findings imply that human resources management should ensure that staff are treated fairly to enhance their job motivation and performance. On the other hand, [Fatima, Majeed, and Saeed \(2017\)](#), who examined the impact of participative leadership on the innovative behavior among service staff, concluded that participative leadership tends to increase innovative work behavior, with the relationship being partially mediated by staff commitment to change. Additionally, change readiness was found to moderate the relationship between participative leadership and staff commitment to change, and the relationship between participative leadership and innovative behavior.

In their investigation, [Kosgei and Edabu \(2023\)](#) studied the impact of participative leadership on teachers' job satisfaction at public primary schools. Findings showed that participative headteachers tend to have a significant and positive influence on teachers' job satisfaction. Findings imply that participative headteachers strive to increase teachers' autonomy and ownership, which makes them feel more engaged and satisfied since they help shape school goals and processes, thus aligning their work with personal values. By promoting joint decision-making among teachers, participative headteachers enhance their motivation and commitment, which makes teachers work harder, thus fostering enthusiasm and stronger commitment to their roles and the institution. By emphasizing innovative problem-solving and better work-life balance, participative headteachers enable teachers to tackle challenges and find creative solutions, which leads to professional growth, better performance, and job satisfaction.

The influence of participatory leadership on employee job satisfaction and organizational culture was examined by [Nassani et al. \(2024\)](#). Findings revealed that participatory leadership was significantly related to job satisfaction and organizational culture, with work-life balance mediating the relationship between participatory leadership and job satisfaction. Findings imply that participatory leaders increase job satisfaction by involving staff in decision-making, which makes them feel accountable and invested in outcomes, thus boosting their job satisfaction. By recognizing and appreciating staff's contributions and input, participatory leaders make them feel valued and motivated. By being consultative, participatory leaders increase organizational commitment and loyalty. Findings also imply that participatory leaders propagate a positive organizational culture by establishing a framework of collaboration, trust, fairness, and shared values. By encouraging open communication, they encourage proactive information sharing, while reducing hierarchical barriers. Lastly, by cultivating an ethical environment, they reinforce fair practices and accountability, which aligns with a productive organizational culture.

The impact of participative leadership on work-life balance among staff from diverse industries was assessed by [Ahad et al. \(2024\)](#). Findings revealed that work interference tends to play a significant role of in staff's personal life, and vice versa, thus contributing to their emotional exhaustion. Findings imply that participative leadership, characterized by empathy and emotional intelligence, acts as a crucial mitigating factor against stress and emotional burnout. Further, [Mpuangnan et al. \(2024\)](#) looked into the impact of participative leadership and motivation on university staff's performance. Findings revealed that participatory leadership and motivation tend to have a considerable positive impact on staff performance, with job satisfaction acting as a mediator in the relationship between participative leadership, motivation, and staff performance. Findings imply that universities should enhance staff motivation and

engagement by fostering a work environment characterized by participative leadership, which can foster growth opportunities and a culture of appreciation and acknowledgment of staff.

2.5. Impact on Character Education

[Purwanto et al. \(2019\)](#) probed the effect of participative leadership on the implementation of character education in schools among vice-principals and teachers. Findings showed that participative leaders tend to be inclusive and involve all staff, besides allowing them to express their ideas and paying close attention to all ideas. Further, they were also found to provide constructive feedback to staff, thus providing an opportunity for them to compare ideas and provide meaningful suggestions. Lastly, participative leaders were found to provide motivation and support for character education at the class, school and community levels, thus earning greater trust and respect from staff.

In their investigation, [Komariah et al. \(2024\)](#) studied the impact of participative leadership on character education implementation at elementary schools. Findings showed that participative principals tend to create harmonious relationships amongst staff to promote understanding and reduce conflict when executing character education tasks. Findings imply that participative principals emphasize or promote (1) a shared vision by involving all stakeholders in developing character education goals, (2) staff empowerment and autonomy by giving teachers the freedom to innovate in terms of teaching character education, (3) collaboration by building strong relationships and teamwork among teachers, staff, and parents to implement character education, (4) delegation by distributing responsibilities for character-building activities, and (5) modeling by acting as role models for moral-ethical behavior.

2.6. Impact on Innovation

In their investigation, [Aljufri and Kusumawati \(2025\)](#) examined the impact of participatory leadership on school innovation climate and teacher collaboration. Findings indicated that participatory leadership tend to have a significant impact on school innovation climate, with teacher collaboration as a significant mediator in the relationship between participatory leadership and innovation climate. Findings imply that participatory leadership impacts innovation climate by way of inclusivity and trust, whereby school leaders encourage shared decision-making that makes teachers feel safe to propose creative ideas. Besides, it emphasizes staff empowerment and autonomy that allows teachers to have greater control over their work, which acts as a key driver for creative problem-solving and innovation. Lastly, participatory leadership fosters collective innovation, which encourages teachers to share good practices, learn from each other, and collectively develop new strategies, thus amplifying innovation.

Lastly, [Riza, Hutahayan, and Chong \(2025\)](#) surveyed the impact of participative revealed that participative leadership tends to significantly and positively influence both innovation and organizational commitment because it promotes innovation by (1) encouraging idea generation, whereby diverse perspectives and suggestions are solicited to develop novel and effective solutions, (2) fostering psychological safety, whereby staff who feel that their opinions are valued, are more likely to take calculated risks, (3) enhancing cognitive flexibility, whereby exposure to diverse viewpoints help staff adapt their thinking and problem-solving strategies, and (4) promoting knowledge

sharing, whereby open communication and information exchange among team members often lead to successful innovation. On the other hand, participative leadership influences organizational commitment because it (1) increases a sense of ownership by involving staff in decision-making, which gives them a personal stake in the organization's success, (2) builds trust and loyalty, whereby leaders who respect staff input can strengthen trust and loyalty, reducing turnover rates and fostering a more dedicated workforce, (3) aligns organizational goals, whereby staff participation in goal setting helps align individual goals with those of the organization, ensuring that everyone is working toward common goals, and (4) boosts morale and satisfaction, whereby staff who feel heard and valued tend to demonstrate greater job satisfaction and higher morale, directly contributing to higher levels of commitment.

2.7. Impact on Competencies, Assertive Behavior, Communication, and Social Responsibility

In a study, [Gahwaji \(2019\)](#) investigated the impact of participative leadership on principals' professional competencies. Findings revealed significant differences between participative leadership dimensions and professional competencies. Participative leadership tends to significantly boost principals' professional competencies by involving teachers in decisions, fostering collaboration, and empowering staff, which leads to increased motivation, better problem-solving, and improved learning quality and outcomes. Lastly, participative leadership, which underscores a shared vision, teacher consultation, co-learning, and autonomy, enables principals to demonstrate and foster other crucial competencies, including change management, relationship building, and instructional leadership, which in turn, improve overall school effectiveness and quality of education.

[Toufighia et al. \(2024\)](#) surveyed the impact of participative leadership and on staff's speaking-up behavior and knowledge-sharing. Findings indicated that participative leadership tends to be positively related to speaking-up behavior. Moreover, language proficiency and region were also found to significantly influence staff's willingness to speak up. Findings imply that organizations should adopt participative leadership to foster an inclusive environment that empowers staff voice, thus allowing them express their opinions, concerns, and suggestions to influence decisions and organizational matters. Encompassing both formal and informal channels for communication and feedback, staff voice helps create a more engaged, productive, and inclusive work environment through sharing knowledge and accommodating cultural and linguistic diversity. On the other hand, [Al-Mawla \(2024\)](#) appraised the relationships among participative leadership, stress, and job satisfaction among hospital staff. Findings revealed that participative leadership tends to reduce stress, while increasing job satisfaction, implying that hospitals should replace rigid leadership styles with participative leadership to improve healthcare workers' overall wellbeing, efficiency, and productivity.

The impact of participative leadership in terms of communication by school principals was examined by [Emmanuel and Mtana \(2025\)](#). Findings indicated that participative school administrators tend to encourage frequent staff meetings, open discussion, joint decision-making and one-on-one communication, besides using virtual channels to obtain staff feedback. Additionally, they also tend to delegate work, value teachers' ideas, and involve teachers in curricular planning. Findings imply that participative school administrators practice or foster (1) inclusive decision-making,

while retaining final responsibility for outcomes. (2) active listening and empathy by paying close attention to teachers' perspectives and creating a safe space for open communication without judgment, (3) transparency and trust by being reliable, honest, and sharing information about school goals and challenges, and (4) collaboration over hierarchy by moving from traditional top-down or bureaucratic models to decentralized leadership that values collective wisdom.

The impact of participative leadership on academic leaders' social responsibility was examined by [Bataneh et al. \(2025\)](#). Findings indicated that academic leaders tend to demonstrate moderate levels of participative leadership and social responsibility. Besides, participative leadership and social responsibility was also found to be significantly and positively related. Findings imply that, participative leaders who provide decision-making autonomy and support often increase staff's positive attitudes and behaviors, including a greater sense of responsibility toward organizational social goals. They also support work-life balance, which generates organizational loyalty and raises affective commitments, further reinforcing socially responsible internal environments.

Lastly, while participative leadership has been associated with multiple organizational outcomes, the present study focused specifically on participative decision-making as perceived by secondary school teachers in Sabah.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study employed a quantitative research approach for its suitability in systematically investigating perceived participative leadership. The approach was aligned to the primary purpose of the study, which was to survey teachers' perceptions of participative leadership among principals in Sabah, Malaysia. It enabled the writers to objectively evaluate teachers' perceptions at four large secondary schools in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, besides providing the appropriate statistical technique to determine if significant differences existed by way of gender, age, and job experience in perceived participative leadership. Additionally, the approach also facilitated data collection through a Likert-scale questionnaire, thus guaranteeing adequate representation of teachers from the Kota Kinabalu area. Lastly, the quantitative design enabled the writers to use numerical data to provide the empirical information needed to reach a conclusion about the research grounded on statistical evidence.

3.2. Research Location

Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah was chosen as the research location, where quantitative research on participative leadership among secondary school principals is lacking. It was also chosen because it has 17 large secondary schools, which could provide a sufficiently representative sample of teachers, thus allowing for a relatively accurate assessment of teachers' perceptions of participative leadership at Sabahan secondary schools.

3.3. Sample and Justification

The sample consisted of 63 teachers ($n = 63$) recruited from four secondary schools in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Initially, nine secondary schools were contacted via email and phone, but ultimately, only four principals agreed to participate by disseminating the survey link with teachers. The sample was deemed adequate in providing relevant data because the central limit theorem states that a minimum of 30 respondents is sufficient to yield statistical power for basic survey research (Roscoe, 1975; RUBIKTOP, 2023). Additionally, the sample was considered representative of teachers from the Kota Kinabalu area because selection bias was minimized through the initial systematic random sampling of the nine schools.

While the sample size was limited to 63, it met the minimum requirement for quantitative research in the educational field. Roscoe (1975) and Turney (2022) recommended a sample size of 30 for most statistical research, which is supported by the central limit theorem, stipulating that sampling distributions reach normality with 30 or more respondents. Lastly, the current sample size provided a reasonable margin of error and enough power to identify modest effects in the statistical tests used in the current study.

About 68.3 percent were males, while 31.7 percent were females. Age-wise, 17.5 percent were 26 to 36 years old, 41.3 percent were 37 to 47 years old, and 33.3 percent were 48 to 58 years old. About 15.9 percent have less than five years of job experience, 14.3 percent have six to 10 years of job experience, 14.3 have 11 to 15 years of job experience, 7.9 percent have 16 to 21 years of job experience, and 47.6 percent have more than 21 years of job experience. All of them came from diverse ethnic communities in Sabah and are fluent in both the Malay Language and English (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Teachers

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 25	0	0.0
	26-36	11	17.5
	37-47	26	41.3
	48-58	21	33.3
	More than 58	5	7.9
Gender	Male	43	68.3
	Female	20	31.7
Job experience (years)	Less than 5	10	15.9
	6-10	9	14.3
	11-15	9	14.3
	16-21	5	7.9
	More than 21	30	47.6

3.4. Instrument

The Participative Decision-Making dimension of Empowering Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ) developed by Arnold et al. (2000) was used to collect data. It consists of six Likert-scale items ranging from Never = 1, Rarely = 2, Sometimes = 3, Often = 4, and Always = 5. Moreover, Arnold et al. (2000) provided a detailed description on the validity and reliability of the ELQ based on three separate studies; results indicated that the Participative Decision-Making dimension has adequate validity and reliability to provide

numerical data. To establish its reliability for the current study, a pilot test was carried out on 25 Malaysian teachers. Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Results indicated that its Cronbach's alpha value is 0.94, thus indicating that it has high internal consistency.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

After being informed that survey completion was an indication of consent to voluntarily participate in the study, teachers were required to complete the questionnaire on Google Forms. Anonymity was strictly maintained, while all responses were kept strictly confidential. Data were subsequently transferred onto a spreadsheet and analyzed using SPSS 26.0. First, Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences perceived participative leadership by way of age and job experience. Second, to determine if there were any significant gender differences, Mann-Whitney U test was run. Third, to determine if any of the participative leadership items were significant at a hypothesized value of 3.5, Wilcoxon signed rank test was used. Lastly, descriptive statistics were used to present the percentages of agreement on each item.

4. Findings

Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed nonsignificant differences in teachers' perceptions of participative leadership by way of age and job experience, while Mann-Whitney U test showed nonsignificant differences in terms of gender (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2: Kruskal-Wallis H and Mann-Whitney U Results

Fixed variables	Non-parametric test	p-value
Age	Kruskal-Wallis H test	0.363
Gender	Mann-Whitney U test	0.818
Job experience	Kruskal-Wallis H test	0.701

Results of the Wilcoxon signed rank test showed that four (4) of the items were significant at $p < 0.001$, while only one item was significant at $p < 0.05$ (see [Table 3](#)).

Table 3: Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test Results (Hypothesized Value = 3.5)

My principal	p-value
Encourages teaching group members to express ideas/suggestions	< 0.001***
Listens to teaching group's ideas and suggestions	< 0.001***
Uses teaching group's suggestions to make decisions	< 0.001***
Gives all teaching group members a chance to voice their opinions	< 0.001***
Considers teaching group's ideas even when he/she disagrees with them	< 0.041*
Makes decisions that are based on everyone's ideas	0.070

*** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$

Percentages of "often" and "always" for each item were collapsed to gain an overall view of teachers' perceptions of participative leadership among principals. First, 77.7 percent of teachers perceived that principals often/always encourage teaching group members to express ideas or suggestions and give them a chance to voice their opinions. Second, 68.3 to 69.9 percent of teachers indicated that principals often/always listen to their ideas and suggestions and use their suggestions to make decisions. Lastly, 61.9 to 63.5

percent agreed that principals often/always make decisions that are based on everyone’s ideas and always consider their ideas even when they disagree with them. Overall percentages indicated that only an average proportion of teachers tend to perceive their principals are participative leaders (see [Table 4](#)).

Table 4: Percentages of Agreement on Perceived Instructional Leadership

My principal	1	2	3	4	5	4+5 (collapsed)
Encourages teaching group members to express ideas/suggestions	3.2	6.3	12.7	31.7	46.0	77.7
Listens to teaching group's ideas and suggestions	1.6	7.9	20.6	28.6	41.3	69.9
Uses teaching group's suggestions to make decisions	1.6	3.2	27.0	39.7	28.6	68.3
Gives all teaching group members a chance to voice their opinions	1.6	4.8	15.9	31.7	46.0	77.7
Considers teaching group's ideas even when he/she disagrees with them	1.6	9.5	25.4	41.3	22.2	63.5
Makes decisions that are based on everyone’s ideas	1.6	9.5	27.0	41.3	20.6	61.9

Never = 1, Rarely = 2, Sometimes = 3, Often = 4, Always = 5

5. Implications and Recommendations

5.1. Collective Wellbeing

Findings imply that only an average proportion of teachers perceive their principals as participative leaders, reflecting that principals tend to practice a moderate level of participative leadership; in brief, participative practices are present in secondary schools, but not yet deeply institutionalized. Previous research showed that Malaysian leaders tend to adopt the hierarchical approach in their administration. [Kennedy \(2002\)](#) asserted that Malaysian leaders tend to place high emphasis on collective wellbeing and display a strong humane orientation, while maintaining an authoritarian stance. The Malaysian culture generally inhibits assertive, confrontational behavior and prioritizes the preservation of organizational harmony. Giving face is a crucial concept in Malaysian society, whereby people are required to show respect or deference to others, especially those with higher status; highly valued, it is a way of maintaining or enhancing an individual or group’s reputation and honor. Rather than participative, Malaysian principals tend to be paternalistic, showing compassion toward staff.

5.2. Sociocultural Expectations

Additionally, Malaysian principals tend to practice leadership in ways that are more concordant with their sociocultural status. They find it difficult to accept participative leadership due to the deeply-rooted sociocultural values in Malaysia, where high power distance is common. Besides, many Malaysian principals are often regarded as civil servants who serve as line managers within the hierarchy of a centralized system of education. Therefore, participative leadership is a novel practice that seems challenging for them; they are more accustomed to practicing administrative leadership that enables them to retain their formal authority. Since participative leadership involves sharing and redistribution of power, it is incompatible with the highly hierarchal form of leadership

that allows principals to exert disproportionate influence over teachers. Additionally, the top-down, stratified approach at Malaysian schools also dictates that all important decisions are made at the principal's office, which are subsequently communicated to the rest of the staff to execute on. This leadership style perpetuates a strong emphasis on respect for authority and deference to those holding influential positions ([Bush et al., 2018](#); [Bush & Glover, 2014](#)).

5.3. Power Structure

Additionally, the existing power structure at Malaysian schools is an obstacle to the successful introduction and implementation of participative leadership, which presents inherent threats to the leadership status and status quo. The gap between participative leadership theory and leadership practice in Malaysia is widening, while teachers are already constrained by high power distance. The practice of participative leadership at schools depends largely on whether principals, who are often authoritarian or paternalistic, are willing listen to teachers' ideas and suggestions and incorporate them in the decision-making process. Current findings imply that opportunities for teacher initiative tend to be limited, with decision-making mainly guided or controlled by principals, who tend to be highly prescriptive under the Ministry of Education ([Bush et al., 2018](#); [Bush & Glover, 2014](#)).

[Mohamad, Silong, and Hassan \(2009\)](#) reiterated that the Malaysian public sector should change its leadership style to become more participative rather than relying on a directive and autocratic style to remain relevant in the 21st century. As aforementioned, the principal-teacher relationship has been grounded on the principal's authority and teachers' subservience due to large power distance. Malaysian principals tend to take unilateral and decisive actions in terms of goal setting goals, planning and strategizing, organizing and coordinating activities, and evaluating teacher performance. In contrast, participative leadership is not limited to the top management, but also involves all levels of the organization. To become more participative, principals should act as facilitators, communicators, problem-solvers, team leaders, coaches, change agents, and mentors who encourages teachers to participate in decision-making by engaging them in planning, implementing, and monitoring teaching and learning activities. Lastly, they should also be open-minded and listen to teachers' views and comments by mingling freely with them.

5.4. Commitment, Civic-consciousness, and Innovativeness

Participative leadership tends to increase staff's commitment, civic-consciousness, and innovativeness ([Hawley, 2024](#)). First, to enhance teacher commitment, principals should adopt a participative approach to boost their morale and make them feel psychologically empowered to become more involved in decision-making, which can lead to higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Moreover, committed teachers also tend to display a higher sense of emotional trust in their principals. Second, to promote civic-consciousness among teacher at school, principals can become more participative by promoting change-oriented organizational citizenship behaviors, which allow teachers to undertake tasks that are not part of their formal job description. For instance, teachers can assist overburdened colleagues with work tasks, mentor new colleagues, or help keep the workspaces and communal areas spik and span. Lastly, since participative leadership tends to promote innovation and change, principals should encourage teachers to generate possible solutions to counter the problems and

challenges faced by the school community. They should organize workshops and other forms of training to inculcate a higher degree of change readiness among teachers to make them become more committed to change, while demonstrating higher levels of innovation under a participative style.

5.5. Final Thought

Finally, this study makes an important contribution to understanding the nature and extent of participative leadership in secondary schools in Sabah, Malaysia, more generally, within a centralized context. However, to increase generalizability of findings, data should be collected from more Malaysian states so that a larger, more diverse sample could be recruited to yield more valid and reliable results, thus increasing the generalizability of current findings. Lastly, the impact of participative leadership should be explored by correlating it with teacher job satisfaction, school morale, and other educational variables.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study has strictly adhered to all ethical procedures involving the use of human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents who were ascertained of their anonymity, with their responses kept strictly confidential. They were also informed that the study was of low risk and that they could stop participating any time without any repercussions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no potential conflict of interest regarding this study in terms of the research or publication of this article.

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