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Development of a Learning Leadership Model for Vocational High School Principals to Foster Student Well-Being Within the Framework of Merdeka Belajar

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the necessity of a learning leadership model for vocational school principals to realise student well-being in the context of Merdeka Belajar policy, develop a theoretically and empirically valid learning leadership model for vocational high school principals to achieve student well-being (KPK-SW Model) within the Merdeka Belajar framework, and assess the appropriateness and significance of the learning leadership model for vocational high school principals in achieving student well-being. This research employed the Research and Development (R&D) method, consisting of four phases: exploration, prototype development, field testing with evaluation and revision, and final validation. Data were collected through focus group discussions, questionnaires, document analysis, observations, and semi-structured interviews involving 10 education experts and practitioners. The validity and reliability of questionnaire instruments were ensured through expert validation, while qualitative data validity was confirmed through informant review and data triangulation. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using descriptive analysis, while qualitative data was analysed using an interactive analysis model. Research findings indicate that the KPK-SW model is highly significant for fostering student well-being. Validation assessments yielded scores of 4.44 from the Head of the Education Office of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, 4.39 from school supervisors, 4.32 from the Deputy Head of Secondary Education Office, and 4.38 from education experts. The overall average score of 4.38/5.00 places the model in the "very important" category, indicating that the KPK-SW model is both theoretically grounded and practically appropriate for implementation in Indonesian vocational high schools within the Merdeka Belajar framework.

Keywords: learning leadership model; instructional leadership; school principal; vocational high school; student well-being; Merdeka Belajar; school improvement

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INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian national education system, as established by Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, encompasses comprehensive educational objectives including academic achievement, religious development, self-discipline, personality development, noble character, and practical skills acquisition (Republic of Indonesia, 2003). However, contemporary educational practice in Indonesia reveals a significant misalignment with these idealized objectives. As documented in recent scholarship, many Indonesian schools increasingly prioritize measurable academic outcomes including standardized test scores, grade point averages, and certification rates often at the expense of the multifaceted values articulated in national legislation (Yuliana et al., 2019). This narrow focus on academic achievement has produced substantial unintended consequences for student development, including elevated academic stress, increased anxiety and depression symptoms, diminished intrinsic learning motivation, and compromised psychological well-being (Ingtias et al., 2022). In response to these systemic challenges, Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture launched the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) policy framework in 2019, representing a paradigm shift in educational philosophy and institutional priorities (Harris & Jones, 2017). This transformative policy explicitly prioritizes student autonomy, flexible curriculum implementation and holistic student development within

psychologically safe and emotionally supportive learning environments (Prasetyo, 2023). The Merdeka Belajar framework acknowledges that sustainable academic achievement fundamentally depends on students experiencing psychological safety, a sense of belonging, emotional support, and purposeful engagement in learning activities dimensions collectively constituting student well-being (Pietarinen et al., 2014). Implementing this policy presents particular challenges for Indonesia's vocational high schools (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan, or SMK), which serve diverse student populations with varying academic preparation, heterogeneous learning needs, and diverse career aspirations.

Extensive empirical research has established that school principal leadership represents a critical factor in determining educational outcomes and institutional effectiveness across diverse contexts. According to international research synthesis examining the impact of various school factors, principal leadership ranks second only to classroom instruction in its influence on student achievement, with effects particularly pronounced in under-resourced and challenging school contexts (Bush & Glover, 2014). School principals function as key organizational leaders whose strategic decisions regarding vision development, instructional guidance, human resource development, and school climate significantly influence teacher quality, school culture, and ultimately student outcomes (González-Falcón et al., 2020). Instructional leadership a specific leadership dimension that prioritizes teaching and learning as central organizational values demonstrates particularly robust relationships with school improvement outcomes and student achievement gains (Gawlik, 2018). Instructional leadership encompasses deliberate principal actions including: establishing clear and challenging learning objectives aligned with student needs, providing substantive instructional guidance to teachers, creating academically rigorous yet emotionally supportive learning climates, evaluating teaching quality, allocating resources toward instructional improvement, and fostering collaborative professional learning among educators (Southworth, 2022). Contemporary leadership frameworks, specifically Murphy and Brennan's (2024) influential model, identify four fundamental dimensions of effective instructional leadership that create positive school environments: (1) developing and communicating clear school mission and educational goals aligned with diverse student needs, (2) managing educational administration functions efficiently and transparently, (3) actively promoting academic climate and high achievement expectations, and (4) deliberately creating conducive work environments that sustain teacher engagement and motivation (Murphy & Brennan, 2024). Recent empirical research demonstrates that when principals employ instructional leadership approaches explicitly oriented toward student well-being, they create organizational conditions where academic excellence and holistic student development reinforce rather than contradict each other (Day et al., 2016).

Vocational high schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta exemplify systemic quality challenges confronting Indonesia's vocational education sector more broadly. According to empirical research documenting accreditation status, among 70 vocational high schools surveyed in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, significant disparities in educational quality were evident: only 38 schools achieved a B-level accreditation rating or higher, while 14 schools in Sleman district remained unaccredited; similarly, 17 unaccredited schools were identified in Bantul district, and 16 in Gunung Kidul district (Yuliana et al., 2019). These accreditation gaps indicate that many vocational schools fail to meet established national education standards in critical areas including curriculum implementation, teaching quality, physical infrastructure, and student support systems. Principals of inadequately accredited schools frequently lack systematic frameworks for addressing multiple simultaneous priorities, including academic quality assurance, staff professional development, comprehensive student support services, and increasingly important within the Merdeka Belajar policy context deliberate cultivation of student well-being. Paradoxically, despite Indonesia's substantial investments in principal professional development programs and the abundant international literature documenting effective instructional leadership practices, empirical evidence indicates that most Indonesian school principals have not yet effectively implemented instructional leadership approaches. A comprehensive survey conducted by the Tanoto Foundation in 2018, conducted in collaboration with Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture and Ministry of Religious Affairs, revealed concerning implementation gaps: only 32 percent of school principals had effectively adopted instructional leadership models, while 22 percent had not yet initiated implementation efforts, resulting in widely documented ineffective learning processes across the school system (Tanoto Foundation, 2019). This significant theory-practice gap suggests that generic international leadership models require substantial adaptation to address

Indonesia's specific cultural contexts, educational policy environments, and vocational education sector characteristics.

Student well-being represents a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, mental, social, and physical dimensions including psychological safety, sense of belonging, positive relationships with peers and educators, meaningful learning engagement, perceived self-efficacy, and access to comprehensive support systems (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Contemporary research demonstrates that vocational education students face distinctive challenges requiring particular institutional attention and targeted support. Vocational students frequently experience academic pressure, unstable life circumstances, and challenges navigating education-to-labor-market transitions, placing them at heightened risk of psychological strain compared to their peers in general secondary education (Hallinger et al., 2018). Empirical research documents that students' emotional and cognitive engagement key dimensions of student well-being directly determine academic achievement, school satisfaction, and long-term educational outcomes (Pietarinen et al., 2014). Transformational leadership theory provides theoretical support for linking principal leadership behaviors with student well-being outcomes. Research evidence indicates that principals employing transformational strategies—including inspiring and motivating staff toward shared visions, providing individualized consideration for diverse staff needs, demonstrating intellectual stimulation, and consistently modeling desired institutional values create organizational cultures where students experience psychological safety, belonging, and sense of purpose (Day et al., 2016). Emotional intelligence emerges as a particularly critical dimension of effective leadership in fostering student well-being. Research examining the role of emotional intelligence in school leadership demonstrates that principals with high emotional intelligence—the capacity to recognize, understand, and effectively regulate emotions in themselves and others—more successfully motivate teachers, create inclusive and psychologically safe learning environments, and foster comprehensive student well-being (Al Shehhi et al., 2021). These emotional intelligence dimensions appear particularly consequential in vocational education settings, where students may experience heightened sensitivity regarding academic identity, career preparation anxieties, and social inclusion concerns (Khanal et al., 2020).

While substantial international scholarship documents effective instructional leadership frameworks and their relationships with student outcomes, significant knowledge gaps persist regarding how instructional leadership principles can be systematically adapted to Indonesia's specific vocational education context, how instructional leadership can be explicitly oriented toward fostering student well-being within the Merdeka Belajar policy framework, and how to systematically develop context-specific leadership models combining theoretical rigor with practical implementability for Indonesian vocational school principals (Freeman & Fields, 2023). This research addresses these critical gaps by developing and systematically validating the KPK-SW Model (Learning Leadership Model of Vocational High School Principals to Realise Student Well-Being), a theoretically grounded yet contextually responsive instructional leadership model explicitly designed for Indonesian vocational high schools implementing the Merdeka Belajar policy. The model development process integrates: (1) established international instructional leadership theory and contemporary leadership scholarship, (2) recent empirical research on student well-being, school climate, and student engagement, (3) Indonesia's specific policy context and cultural educational values, and (4) systematic validation by educational administrators, school-based supervisors, and recognized experts with direct vocational education experience. This research provides vocational school principals with a clear, practical framework for implementing Merdeka Belajar principles while simultaneously achieving educational quality improvements and supporting holistic student development (Bryson, 2018). By demonstrating a systematic process for model development, validation, and contextual adaptation, this research contributes methodological guidance for adapting international educational innovations to Indonesia's specific contexts, addressing the persistent theory-practice gap in educational leadership implementation (Prasojo & Yuliana, 2021). The research employs rigorous Research and Development (R&D) methodology incorporating theoretical foundation building, expert consultation, and structured validation processes (Gall et al., 1996).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed the Research and Development (R&D) methodology, a systematic approach for developing, testing, and refining educational innovations through iterative cycles combining theoretical grounding with empirical validation. According to Gall et al. (1996), Educational R&D is defined as "An industry-based development model in which the findings of the research are used to design new products and procedures, which are then systematically field-tested, evaluated, and refined until they meet specified criteria of effectiveness, quality, or similar standards" (p. 775). The R&D approach is particularly appropriate for educational leadership model development because it bridges theory and practice through structured phases of design, empirical testing, feedback integration, and systematic refinement.

Research Procedures and Phases

The research progressed through four sequential phases:

1. Exploration (Needs Assessment and Theoretical Development) The initial phase involved comprehensive literature review of instructional leadership theory, student well-being scholarship, and educational policy implementation research; systematic analysis of the Merdeka Belajar policy framework and its implementation requirements; pre-survey of vocational high schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta identifying specific leadership challenges and field-based concerns regarding student well-being; and comprehensive documentation review of school policies, accreditation reports, curriculum frameworks, and national education standards to establish the theoretical and practical foundation for model development.
2. Prototype Development (Model Formulation) During this phase, the research team developed the initial KPK-SW Model prototype by integrating Murphy and Brennan's (2024) four-dimensional instructional leadership framework with contextually specific Indonesian factors, contemporary theories of student well-being and school climate, and systematic input from educational administrators and school-based supervisors. This phase involved synthesis of theoretical insights with practical recommendations from field-based practitioners, formulation of the eight core assessment dimensions reflecting instructional leadership theory, and explicit incorporation of Merdeka Belajar policy principles and vocational education-specific considerations.
3. Field Testing, Evaluation, and Revision (Empirical Validation) This critical phase involved systematic expert assessment through structured questionnaires using five-point Likert scale measurements, focus group discussions exploring model comprehensiveness and practical applicability in vocational school contexts, semi-structured interviews gathering detailed feedback on implementation feasibility and contextual appropriateness, and systematic integration of feedback from multiple sources for model refinement and improvement.
4. Final Validation (Implementation Readiness Assessment) The final phase involved comprehensive synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings, systematic assessment of consensus across stakeholder groups regarding model necessity and appropriateness, and development of implementation recommendations based on integrated expert feedback and field experience.

Research Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study involved 10 carefully selected educational experts and practitioners representing diverse roles and perspectives within Indonesia's educational system: 1 Head of the Provincial Education Office (Dinas Pendidikan) of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, 1 Deputy Head of Secondary Education Programs, 4 School Supervisors (Pengawas Sekolah) from different vocational high schools representing varying geographical (urban, suburban, rural) and institutional contexts, and 4 educational management and leadership experts affiliated with universities possessing recognized expertise in educational leadership, vocational education policy, and school improvement initiatives. This purposive sampling strategy ensured representation across multiple educational system levels and diverse vocational school contexts, facilitating triangulation of perspectives and strengthening model validation through multiple stakeholder viewpoints.

Data Collection Methods

The research employed multiple complementary data collection strategies ensuring comprehensive information gathering and systematic validation:

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Structured discussions with expert panels explored the theoretical foundations of the proposed model, practical implications for vocational school contexts, and implementation feasibility. FGDs facilitated dialogue enabling researchers to clarify theoretical concepts, explore contextual nuances specific to Indonesian vocational education, identify potential implementation barriers, and obtain preliminary reactions to draft model components. All FGDs were audio-recorded and systematically transcribed.

Structured Questionnaires: Validated questionnaire instruments containing 8 key assessment items measured expert perceptions of the proposed model's importance and appropriateness. Assessment items directly corresponded to the eight core model dimensions reflecting instructional leadership theory. Respondents provided importance ratings using a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Not Important, 2 = Somewhat Important, 3 = Important, 4 = Very Important, 5 = Extremely Important.

Semi-structured Interviews: Targeted interviews with key educational administrators and school supervisors explored their perspectives on vocational school leadership challenges, priority concerns regarding student well-being, and perceived utility of the proposed model. Interviews were guided by open-ended questions enabling respondents to elaborate perspectives and suggest specific model refinements.

Document Analysis: Systematic review of policy documents, school accreditation reports, curriculum frameworks, national education standards, and previous educational leadership research provided contextual information and empirical grounding for model components.

Observational Data: Non-participant observations of school leadership practices, manifestations of school climate, teacher-student interactions, and organizational processes in selected vocational high schools provided empirical grounding for model dimensions.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques including calculation of mean scores, standard deviations, and average scores for each assessment dimension and respondent group; comparative analysis across respondent groups (Head of Education Office, Deputy Head of Secondary Education, School Supervisors, Educational Experts); and categorization using predetermined scoring thresholds: 1.0–1.8 = Not Important; 1.8–2.6 = Somewhat Important; 2.6–3.4 = Important; 3.4–4.2 = Very Important; 4.2–5.0 = Extremely Important.

Qualitative data from focus group discussions, interviews, documents, and observations were analyzed using the interactive analysis model incorporating three iterative components: (1) Data Reduction, whereby raw qualitative data were systematically coded using both theoretical and inductive coding categories, (2) Data Presentation, involving creation of organized thematic summaries and matrices presenting areas of consensus, and (3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification, whereby preliminary findings were verified through member checking and data triangulation (Permana & Arris, 2013).

Validity and Reliability Assurance

Quantitative instrument validity and reliability were ensured through expert review of questionnaire items, pilot testing enabling identification and correction of ambiguous wording, internal consistency reliability assessment via Cronbach's alpha coefficients (all items demonstrated Cronbach's alpha > .70), and item-total correlation analysis. Qualitative data validity was ensured through informant review (member checking), data triangulation comparing multiple data collection methods on the same research topics, peer debriefing with research team members, and comprehensive audit trail documentation of data collection and analysis procedures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Phase-by-Phase Research Development and Model Construction

Through systematic Research and Development procedures progressing across four sequential phases, the research team developed the KPK-SW Model integrating instructional leadership theory

with contemporary scholarship on student well-being, explicitly adapted to Indonesian vocational education contexts and the Merdeka Belajar policy framework. The exploration phase identified critical needs for context-specific leadership models addressing both policy requirements and practical school challenges. The prototype development phase synthesized Murphy and Brennan's (2024) instructional leadership framework with Indonesian contextual factors, stakeholder insights, and contemporary scholarship on student well-being. The field testing phase involved systematic expert validation through multiple methods, and the final validation phase confirmed the model's appropriateness and implementation readiness.

The KPK-SW Model and Eight Core Assessment Dimensions

Through structured expert consultation, focus group discussions, and comprehensive theoretical integration, the research team developed the Learning Leadership Model of Vocational High School Principals to Realise Student Well-Being (KPK-SW Model). This model integrates Murphy and Brennan's (2024) four fundamental instructional leadership dimensions adapted specifically for Indonesian vocational education, explicit focus on student well-being as both an educational outcome and prerequisite for effective learning, alignment with Merdeka Belajar policy principles, vocational education-specific considerations, and contemporary leadership scholarship regarding emotional intelligence and transformational leadership.

The model encompasses eight core assessment dimensions:

1. Setting learning objectives: Principals establish clear, challenging, and achievable learning objectives aligned with student needs and career preparation goals
2. Principal as resource person: Principals actively provide instructional guidance, share expertise, and facilitate access to learning resources
3. Creating conducive learning atmosphere: Principals deliberately cultivate psychologically safe, inclusive, and academically rigorous learning environments
4. Communicating vision and mission: Principals effectively communicate school vision and mission ensuring shared understanding among all stakeholders
5. Guiding staff toward school goals: Principals provide direction, support, and accountability mechanisms aligning efforts toward school goals
6. Developing teacher professionalism: Principals actively support ongoing professional development and career growth for teaching staff
7. Demonstrating positivity: Principals model positive emotional responses, maintain optimistic perspectives, and demonstrate commitment to all stakeholders
8. Overall model importance: General assessment of the model's significance for vocational school contexts

Table 1. Results of the Head of Education Office's Assessment of the Importance of the KPK-SW Model

Assessment Dimension	Average Score	Category
Setting learning objectives	4.40	Very Important
Principal as resource person	4.50	Very Important
Creating conducive learning atmosphere	4.60	Extremely Important
Communicating school vision and mission	4.50	Very Important
Guiding staff to achieve school goals	4.30	Very Important
Developing teacher professionalism	4.40	Very Important
Demonstrating positivity toward stakeholders	4.20	Very Important
Overall model importance	4.60	Extremely Important
Average Total Score	4.44	Very Important

The Head of the Provincial Education Office of the Special Region of Yogyakarta provided exceptionally positive validation of the KPK-SW model, with an overall average score of 4.44/5.00, placing it conclusively within the "very important" category. Individual dimension scores ranged from 4.20–4.60, demonstrating comprehensive support across all eight model components. The highest-rated dimensions were "creating a conducive learning atmosphere" (4.60) and "general assessment of the importance of the model" (4.60), reflecting the administrator's emphasis on the model's potential to foster supportive school environments aligned with Merdeka Belajar objectives. The education

administrator's qualitative feedback emphasized that the model effectively addresses contemporary vocational education leadership challenges, particularly regarding the integration of academic rigor with student well-being consideration.

Table 2. Results of the Deputy Head of Secondary Education Office's Assessment of the Importance of the KPK-SW Model

Assessment Dimension	Average Score	Category
Setting learning objectives	4.30	Very Important
Principal as resource person	4.20	Very Important
Creating conducive learning atmosphere	4.30	Very Important
Communicating school vision and mission	4.40	Very Important
Guiding staff to achieve school goals	4.40	Very Important
Developing teacher professionalism	4.30	Very Important
Demonstrating positivity toward stakeholders	4.40	Very Important
Overall model importance	4.30	Very Important
Average Total Score	4.32	Very Important

The Deputy Head of Secondary Education Office assessed the model with an overall average score of 4.32/5.00, placing it within the "very important" category. The remarkably consistent item scores ranging only from 4.20–4.40, representing a variation of merely 0.20 across all dimensions suggest that this respondent views the model as comprehensively balanced across its eight components, with no component perceived as significantly more or less important than others. All dimensions received ratings between 4.20 and 4.40, indicating broad support for the model's comprehensiveness. The Deputy Head's qualitative feedback emphasized the importance of ensuring model comprehensibility and clear operational definitions, with specific recommendations focusing on clarifying terminology to align with national education policy language.

Table 3. Results of School Supervisors' Assessment on the Importance of the KPK-SW Model

Assessment Dimension	Average Score	Category
Setting learning objectives	4.30	Very Important
Principal as resource person	4.40	Very Important
Creating conducive learning atmosphere	4.50	Very Important
Communicating school vision and mission	4.30	Very Important
Guiding staff to achieve school goals	4.40	Very Important
Developing teacher professionalism	4.50	Very Important
Demonstrating positivity toward stakeholders	4.40	Very Important
Overall model importance	4.30	Very Important
Average Total Score	4.39	Very Important

School supervisors professionals working directly with vocational school principals on quality improvement provided an overall average assessment of 4.39/5.00, the second highest among stakeholder groups. This exceptionally positive assessment reflects supervisors' direct field experience and recognition of the critical need for systematic leadership development frameworks addressing vocational school challenges. The highest-rated dimensions were "creating a conducive learning atmosphere" (4.50) and "developing teacher professionalism" (4.50), reflecting supervisors' field experience indicating these represent significant implementation challenges and priorities for leadership development. Qualitative feedback emphasized the model's practical utility as a diagnostic tool for identifying specific leadership development needs, a supervision framework for quality assurance activities, and a professional development guide for targeted support.

Table 4. Results of Educational Experts' Assessment of the Importance of the KPK-SW Model

Assessment Dimension	Average Score	Category
Setting learning objectives	4.40	Very Important
Principal as resource person	4.40	Very Important
Creating conducive learning atmosphere	4.30	Very Important
Communicating school vision and mission	4.40	Very Important
Guiding staff to achieve school goals	4.50	Extremely Important

Developing teacher professionalism	4.30	Very Important
Demonstrating positivity toward stakeholders	4.30	Very Important
Overall model importance	4.40	Very Important
Average Total Score	4.38	Very Important

Educational management and leadership experts provided an overall average assessment of 4.38/5.00, closely aligned with school supervisors' assessments, confirming the model's strong theoretical validity. The highest-rated dimension was "guiding staff toward school goals" (4.50), reflecting experts' emphasis on collaborative goal setting, organizational alignment, and shared accountability. Expert feedback confirmed the model's theoretical grounding in established instructional leadership frameworks while validating its responsiveness to Indonesia's specific policy and cultural contexts.

Overall Validation Summary and Consensus Assessment

Integration of assessments across all four stakeholder groups provides compelling evidence of the KPK-SW model's significance and implementation readiness:

Respondent Group	Average Score	Category
Head of Education Office	4.44	Very Important
School Supervisors	4.39	Very Important
Educational Experts	4.38	Very Important
Deputy Head of Secondary Education	4.32	Very Important
Overall Consensus Average	4.38	Very Important

Key Findings:

1. Strong Overall Consensus: The overall average of 4.38/5.00 conclusively places the model in the "very important" category (>3.4), substantially exceeding the minimum acceptance threshold of 3.5, indicating definitive implementation readiness.
2. Exceptional Consistency Across Stakeholders: The remarkably narrow range between highest (4.44) and lowest (4.32) assessment—a variation of only 0.12 points—indicates robust consensus across diverse stakeholder groups with different organizational roles and perspectives.
3. Universal Dimension Support: All eight model dimensions received scores exceeding 4.2 across all respondent groups, confirming that no component was deemed less than "very important" and that all dimensions received consistent validation.
4. Dimension-Specific Strengths: "Creating a conducive learning atmosphere" averaged 4.47 across respondents, reflecting recognition that positive school climate constitutes a foundational prerequisite for both academic achievement and student well-being.
5. Stakeholder Agreement on Practical Utility: Consistent qualitative feedback from school supervisors emphasized practical applicability to supervision, professional development, and school improvement contexts.

DISCUSSION

Alignment with Instructional Leadership Theory and Research

The exceptionally high expert assessments validate the KPK-SW model's successful integration of established instructional leadership theory with contemporary scholarship on student well-being. The consistently high ratings for "creating a conducive learning atmosphere" (averaging 4.47) align precisely with contemporary educational research establishing that positive school climate constitutes a foundational prerequisite for both academic achievement and student well-being (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Research evidence documents that students' emotional and cognitive engagement dimensions directly influenced by school climate directly determine academic achievement, psychological health, and school satisfaction (Pietarinen et al., 2014). The model's emphasis on this dimension reflects current research priorities and field-identified needs.

The model's incorporation of relational and emotional dimensions "demonstrating positivity" and collaborative approaches reflects growing recognition that emotional intelligence represents a critical principal competency. Research examining the role of emotional intelligence in school leadership demonstrates that principals with high emotional intelligence effectively manage interpersonal

relationships, model positive emotional responses, create psychologically safe environments, and inspire commitment among teachers and students (Al Shehhi et al., 2021). The consistent validation of these dimensions suggests stakeholders recognize their importance for fostering emotionally supportive environments that contemporary student well-being frameworks emphasize.

Contextual Appropriateness and Policy Responsiveness

The exceptionally high assessments from educational administrators directly engaged with Indonesian vocational education Head of Education Office (4.44), School Supervisors (4.39), Deputy Head of Secondary Education (4.32) provide strong evidence of the model's successful contextual adaptation. These practitioners' enthusiasm reflects recognition that the model effectively addresses authentic field challenges while remaining grounded in established educational theory.

The model's explicit incorporation of Merdeka Belajar framework elements student-centered learning, curriculum flexibility, and holistic student development received strong validation reflecting responsive policy alignment. Successful policy implementation at scale requires leadership models adapted to specific national policy contexts rather than generic international frameworks applied without modification (Harris & Jones, 2017). The KPK-SW Model accomplishes this by synthesizing international instructional leadership scholarship with Indonesia's specific policy environment and vocational education sector characteristics.

Practical Applicability and Implementation Readiness

The particularly strong assessments from school supervisors (4.39) professionals directly engaging with principals on quality improvement provide compelling evidence of the model's practical utility. Supervisors' detailed feedback regarding the model's potential applications as a diagnostic tool, supervision framework, and professional development guide indicates successful bridging of the theory-practice gap.

The remarkable consistency in assessment scores across all stakeholder groups (range: 4.32–4.44, variation of only 0.12) unusual consensus in educational research suggests the model effectively synthesizes multiple stakeholder interests while maintaining conceptual coherence and practical relevance across all educational system levels. This consensus indicates readiness for system-level implementation across Indonesian vocational schools.

Integration of Student Well-being with Instructional Leadership

The exceptionally high ratings for dimensions directly supporting well-being "creating conducive learning atmosphere" (4.47 average) and "demonstrating positivity" (4.33 average) align with recent empirical evidence documenting relationships between positive school climate and student well-being outcomes. The model's success in integrating student well-being with instructional leadership demonstrates that these represent complementary rather than competing priorities.

The KPK-SW model's theoretical integration shows how instructional excellence and student well-being reinforce each other: principals who create psychologically safe environments enhance conditions supporting both academic engagement and emotional health; supported teachers invest greater effort in student success; students who experience safety and belonging develop stronger intrinsic learning motivation and academic engagement (Day et al., 2020). This integration represents an important theoretical and practical contribution to vocational education leadership literature.

Implications for Vocational Education Leadership and System-Level Implementation

The consistent validation across all respondent groups carries particular significance for vocational education. Vocational high schools serve diverse student populations often including individuals with varied academic preparation and sometimes challenged circumstances (Saifurrahman et al., 2021). This population diversity makes systematic instructional leadership emphasizing both academic rigor and student well-being particularly essential. The strong assessments from school supervisors and education administrators suggest readiness for system-level implementation integration into: (1) Provincial and district principal competency frameworks, establishing the model dimensions as expected principal capabilities; (2) School accreditation criteria and quality assurance procedures; (3) Principal pre-service and in-service professional development programs; and (4) School supervision protocols and quality improvement initiatives (Yuliana et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This research successfully developed and systematically validated the Instructional Leadership Model for Student Well-being in Vocational High Schools (KPK-SW Model) through rigorous Research and Development methodology, achieving an overall consensus score of 4.38/5.00 across 10 educational experts representing diverse system levels (Head of Education Office: 4.44, School Supervisors: 4.39, Educational Experts: 4.38, Deputy Head Secondary Education: 4.32), demonstrating exceptional stakeholder agreement that all eight model dimensions are "very important" and exceed the minimum implementation threshold of 3.5. The model synthesizes established instructional leadership theory with contemporary scholarship on student well-being while remaining fully responsive to Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar policy framework and vocational education characteristics, providing principals with a theoretically grounded, contextually appropriate, and practically implementable framework that demonstrates academic excellence and student welfare represent complementary rather than competing priorities. The research addresses critical needs in Indonesian vocational education by bridging the persistent theory-practice gap and providing clear implementation pathways: integration into principal professional development programs, application as diagnostic frameworks for school improvement, incorporation into principal performance evaluation systems and school accreditation criteria, and application to school supervision protocols. By demonstrating that effective instructional leadership deliberately focused on creating psychologically safe, academically rigorous learning environments enables vocational high schools to simultaneously achieve educational quality improvements and support holistic student development, this research contributes meaningfully to advancing both educational practice and scholarship in Indonesia's vocational education sector while establishing a replicable model development methodology for adapting international educational innovations to specific national contexts.

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