# The Transferability of Teacher Characteristics in the Transition to School Leadership

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**To cite this article**

**Abstract**

*Purpose:* This study examines the characteristics developed through teaching that are retained, adapted, or discarded when teachers transition into school leadership roles. The purpose is to explore how these traits influence leadership practice and professional identity.

*Method:* A qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected via an open-ended online survey administered to 83 school principals across 36 provinces in Türkiye. Participant responses were systematically analyzed through content analysis.

*Findings:* Findings reveal four primary themes related to the transferability of teacher characteristics: (1) all should be transferred, (2) some should be transferred, (3) certain traits should not be transferred, and (4) none should be transferred. Most principals highlighted the importance of human competencies (e.g., empathy, fairness), technical skills (e.g., classroom management, planning), and leadership qualities (e.g., instructional and visionary leadership). A minority group cautioned against transferring traits such as excessive familiarity, irritability, or indifference. The findings align with Parsons' Role Theory and reflect Bridges' concept of the "neutral zone," indicating that transition involves partial transformation rather than complete role abandonment. This study provides a theoretically informed empirical contribution to understanding career transitions in educational leadership.

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**Introduction**

In Türkiye, school leadership is not recognized as a distinct profession but as a supplementary role assumed alongside teaching. School administrators are typically selected and appointed from among teachers (Aslanargun, 2011; Recepoğlu & Kılınç, 2014; Aslan & Gül, 2021; Balcı, 2021). This practice is rooted in the belief that "the essence of the profession is teaching," whereby success and seniority in teaching are regarded as key criteria for administrative appointments (Ağaoğlu et al., 2012). Bursalıoğlu (2002) challenges this assumption, arguing that being an effective teacher does not necessarily translate into administrative success. He identifies the emergence of a "teacher-administrator" profile resulting from this flawed logic. Similarly, Aslanargun (2011) notes that educational leadership continues to be treated as an extension of teaching, allowing administrators to return to classroom roles when needed. This enduring approach raises a critical question: Which teaching characteristics are carried over into school leadership, and how does this continuity sustain the existing system?

Most school principals begin their careers as classroom teachers. However, not all teachers view leadership as a desirable trajectory—some prefer to remain in instructional roles, while others see school administration as a step forward in their professional development. Riveros et al. (2013) suggest that many teachers hesitate to pursue formal leadership roles due to concerns about losing their connection with teaching and learning. Nonetheless, teachers often develop leadership capacities within the classroom that may later be exercised in broader school contexts. In some cases, these skills serve as a foundation for formal leadership roles (Riveros et al., 2013). Armstrong (2009) argues that transitioning from teaching to school leadership constitutes a major professional and organizational shift, offering new aspirations and opportunities for transformation. Barnett et al. (2012) similarly describe a cognitive shift that occurs when educators move their focus from the classroom to the school-wide level.

The international literature has examined the teacher-to-leader transition from various perspectives: transitions from assistant principal to principal, the experiences of novice school leaders Armstrong, (2009, 2010, 2014, 2015; Shoho & Barnett, 2010), entry into and exit from the principalship (Shen et al., 1999), transitions from teacher leadership to formal administration (Hohner & Riveros, 2017), and transitions to departmental leadership roles (Jaca, 2021). Other studies have focused on generational perspectives on these transitions (Stone-Johnson, 2014) and challenges in recruiting and retaining school leaders in rural areas (Wood et al., 2013).

National studies in Türkiye have also explored this transition from multiple angles. Bingül & Hacıfazlıoğlu (2011) investigated teachers' aspirations for school leadership. Aslan and Gül (2021) identified career advancement and administrative experience as key motivations for teachers pursuing leadership roles. Sincar & Keser Özmantar (2017) examined how teachers' perceptions evolve after transitioning to district-level leadership. While much of the existing research addresses the general experiences of newly appointed school leaders and the competencies they require, a noticeable gap remains regarding which specific teacher characteristics are transferred—or not—during the transition to school administration. This study aims to explore, from the perspective of school principals, which qualities rooted in teaching are carried over into leadership roles and which are left behind.

**Theoretical Framework**

The transition from teaching to school leadership is a significant career shift that can be examined through both career transition theories and the lens of social role change. This process involves not only a change in professional status but also a redefinition of roles within the broader social and institutional context. The theoretical framework of this research is grounded in three key frameworks: Talcott Parsons' (1951) Role Theory, Bridges' (1991) Transition Theory, and Ibarra's (2004) Career Transition Theory.

*Talcott Parsons' Role Theory*

In this study, the move from teaching to administration is conceptualized as a social role transition. Parsons' role theory, developed within a structural-functionalist paradigm, provides a valuable analytical lens through which to understand the systemic and normative implications of such a shift.

According to Parsons (1951), society functions as a structured system sustained by individuals who occupy various statuses, each associated with a set of socially defined roles. These roles are governed by expectations that contribute to both social order and institutional effectiveness. In this framework, teaching and administration are understood as distinct social statuses with corresponding role expectations.

This theoretical lens supports the central research question—namely, which characteristics should or should not be carried from teaching into school administration—through the following dimensions:

Status and Role Change: The transition requires adopting new roles that align with the administrator's status. While some roles associated with teaching may be retained and adapted, others must be relinquished in favor of leadership functions.

Adaptation to Social Norms: Each role is embedded within a network of social norms. The perspectives of school principals provide insights into which teacher-related behaviors conform to or diverge from the normative expectations of leadership.

Role Conflict and Role Strain: Certain traits stemming from a teacher's identity—such as over-familiarity, emotional reactivity, or student-centredness—may create tension or conflict when juxtaposed with the demands of administrative leadership.

*Career Transition Theories*

Career development literature encompasses a range of models that address role transitions. Latack (1984) distinguishes between three types: (a) intra-organizational, (b) inter-organizational, and (c) inter-professional transitions. The movement from teaching to administration often intersects all three. For instance, a teacher may become an assistant principal within the same institution, assume a leadership role in a different school, or transition into a new organizational context altogether.

Ibarra's (2004) Career Transition Theory conceptualizes career change as a process influenced by shifts in action, identity, learning, and relationships. This theory is particularly useful in

examining the internal and external dynamics that shape the extent to which teacher characteristics are retained or redefined in leadership roles.

Bridges' (1991) Transition Theory offers a psychological model of change, comprising three stages:

Ending: Individuals disengage from their prior identity—in this case, the teacher role. This study examines whether school leaders fully disentangle themselves from this identity or retain elements of it.

Neutral Zone: This is a liminal period marked by uncertainty and role experimentation. It raises the question of whether principals immediately adopt new administrative behaviors or gradually transform existing practices.

New Beginning: This phase signifies the internalization of a new identity. The study examines how principals begin to embody their leadership role and whether this involves discarding or reshaping former teacher characteristics.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a robust framework for analyzing how teacher identity, skills, and dispositions are negotiated during the shift to school leadership. They also provide conceptual clarity on the potential tensions, adaptations, and transformations that may arise during this professional journey.

**Method**

This study employed a qualitative methodology to investigate school principals' perceptions of the transfer of teacher characteristics into leadership roles. Qualitative research enables the examination of social phenomena within their natural contexts by focusing on participants' subjective meanings and experiences using non-numerical data (Merriam, 2009). Specifically, a basic qualitative design—also referred to as general or interpretive qualitative research—was adopted to gain insight into how individuals interpret and make sense of their professional transitions.

*Participants*

Participants were selected using the purposive sampling method with a maximum variation approach (Patton, 2015), which aims to identify shared patterns across a wide range of perspectives. The study's participant group consisted of 83 school principals working at different levels of education across 36 provinces in Turkey, with varying degrees of professional and administrative experience.

School level: 21.7% served in middle schools, 33.7% in high schools, and 44.6% in primary schools.

Gender distribution: The study comprised 25.3% female participants and 74.7% male participants.

Educational qualifications: 48.2% held a bachelor's degree, 49.4% a master's degree, and 2.4% a doctoral degree.

Professional experience: 26.5% had 7–18 years of experience, 62.7% had 19–30 years, and 10.8% had more than 31 years of experience.

Administrative experience: 8.4% had 0–3 years, 20.5% had 4–6 years, 48.2% had 7–18 years, 19.3% had 19–30 years, and 3.6% had more than 31 years of experience as school principals.

### Data Collection

Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the University's Social & Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Protocol No: E-62310886-605.99-123723). Data were collected through an online qualitative survey using Google Forms.

Online qualitative surveys enable participants to articulate their experiences, practices, and perspectives in their own words, thereby generating rich and nuanced data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As Jansen (2010) notes, qualitative surveys are particularly well-suited for capturing the diversity of opinions within a target population and revealing meaningful variation among individuals who share specific characteristics.

The decision to use an online format was driven by the objective of maximizing sample diversity, providing flexibility, and accessing a geographically dispersed group of participants. As Braun et al. (2021) argue, online qualitative surveys are particularly effective for reaching hard-to-reach populations and gathering broad perspectives within limited time frames. In this study, the use of this method enabled the collection of data from school principals across 36 different provinces.

Participants were asked open-ended questions, such as: "In your opinion, which teacher's characteristics should be carried over when transitioning into a leadership role, and which should not? Why? Please explain." The call for participation was disseminated through professional associations and social media platforms. All responses were downloaded in Excel format for analysis.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, which facilitates the systematic identification and interpretation of patterns and meanings in qualitative data (Patton, 2015). The analysis process followed the stages proposed by Marshall and Rossman (2011): initial organization and coding of responses, generation of preliminary themes, and refinement into finalized themes and subthemes. Following the thematic analysis, the findings were visualized and synthesized into a structured narrative. Direct participant quotations were included to illustrate each theme and its corresponding subthemes. As emphasized by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), visual data representation supports interpretation, validation, and further analytical engagement with the material.

### Findings

The findings of the study, derived from the perspectives of 83 school principals, revealed a diverse set of opinions regarding which teacher characteristics should or should not be

transferred into administrative roles. The responses were classified under four thematic categories:

- All teacher characteristics should be transferred.

- Some teacher characteristics should be transferred.

- Certain teacher characteristics should not be transferred.

- No teacher characteristics should be transferred.

These categories were conceptually mapped on a spectrum to demonstrate the variety of perspectives (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

*Principals' Views on the Transferability or not Transferability of Teacher Characteristics to School Leadership*
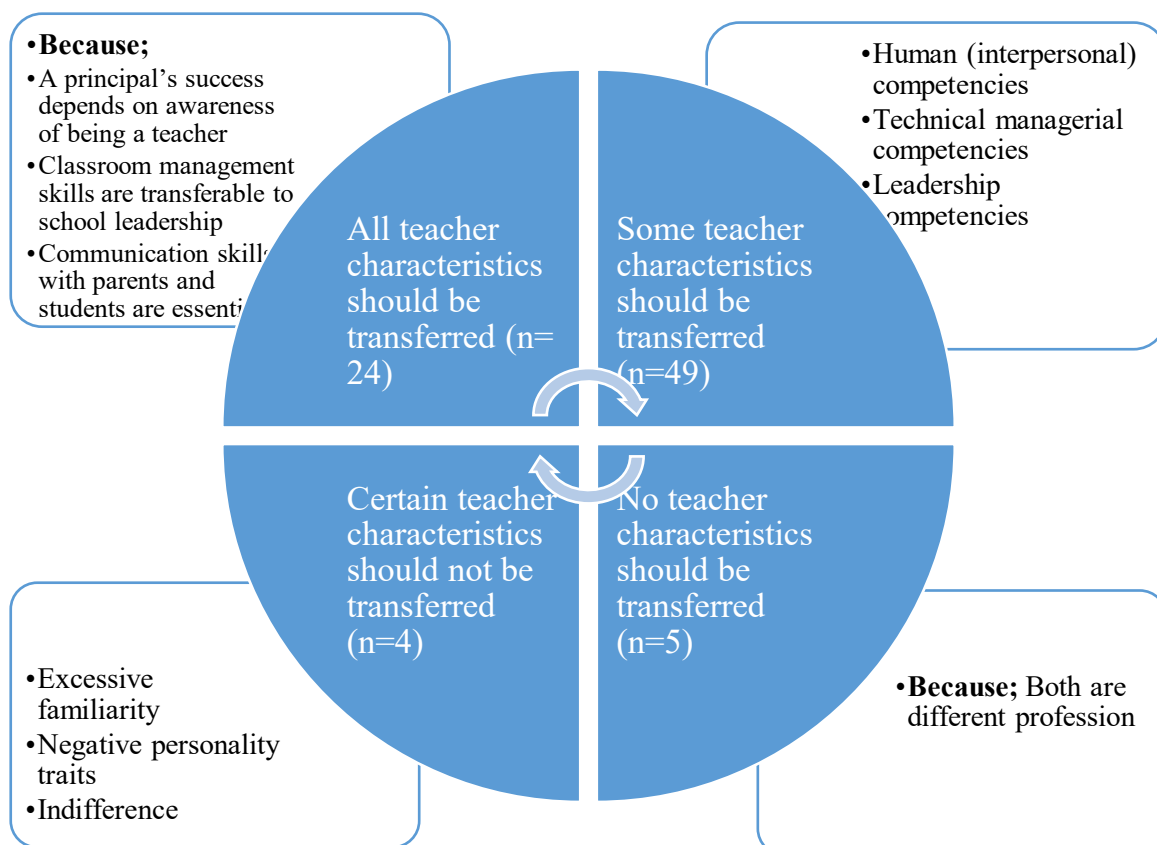


Additionally, the justifications provided by participants for transferring or not transferring particular traits were analyzed and categorized (see Figure 2).

### *All Teacher Characteristics Should Be Transferred*

A significant portion of participating principals—particularly those serving in primary schools—expressed the view that all teacher characteristics should be retained and carried over during the transition to school leadership. A few middle and high school principals also supported this position. While some respondents emphasized a wholesale transfer of teacher competencies, others noted that specific traits, such as self-sacrifice, should not only be preserved but also further developed in administrative practice.

This perspective is illustrated in the following participant statements:

> KM26: "You cannot be a good administrator without first being a good teacher."

> KM42: "All qualities that a teacher should have must also be present in a school administrator."

> KM43: "Administrators should have teaching experience. They must have breathed the atmosphere of the classroom and the teachers' lounge."

> KM40: "Self-sacrifice should not only be transferred but increased."

These views were further clarified through three sub-themes, which together form the rationale behind the belief that teacher characteristics are essential to effective leadership.

a) A Principal's Success Depends on Awareness of Being a Teacher

Many principals argued that leadership effectiveness is rooted in a strong sense of teacher identity. According to them, maintaining this identity helps principals stay grounded in the core mission of schools: teaching and learning.

> KM17: "A good school principal can only be successful if they maintain a teacher's perspective in their attitudes, decisions, and approaches toward both the school and the students."

> KM30: "A good principal must possess the characteristics of a teacher."

> KM35: "Someone whose teaching skills are not above average should not become a school administrator."

b) Classroom Management Skills Are Transferable to School Leadership

Several participants underscored that classroom management experience provides a foundational skill set that aligns well with the responsibilities of school leadership. These skills, including authority, planning, and regulation, were seen as directly adaptable.

> KM3: "Experience gained in classroom management enhances the value of administrator-student relationships. Additionally, professional competencies such as knowledge of regulations and committee experience offer advantages for school leadership.

> KM34: "The teacher's command in the classroom aligns with the competencies required for effective school management. Skills in guiding parents and students are equally relevant. I believe all qualities from teaching should be transferred into leadership, with leadership-specific traits added."

> KM41: "A teacher who can effectively manage a classroom can also effectively manage a school."

c) Communication Skills with Parents and students Are Essential

Principals frequently cited communication with students and parents as one of the most valuable assets teachers bring into leadership roles. These skills were not only considered transferable but also indispensable for creating a connected and responsive school environment.

> KM3: "These skills must be transferred. We are still in the same institutions, still working with students. We must lead by example, not just words."

KM10: "Teachers possess detailed knowledge about their students, including their socio-economic status. When transitioning to leadership, they should be able to analyze and understand the behavior of all stakeholders, including students, teachers, and parents.

KM69: "Emotional sensitivity, the ability to build strong relationships with parents and a drive for continuous self-improvement should be maintained. Teachers should expand their classroom-focused perspective into a broader school vision. A principal must remain an integral part of the school community and act with the awareness that they and their decisions are integral to the educational process.

### Certain Teacher Characteristics That Should Be Transferred

In contrast to the view that all teacher characteristics should be carried into school leadership, a large group of principals argued for a more selective transfer of competencies. These respondents emphasized that certain human, technical, and leadership-oriented traits developed in teaching roles are particularly relevant for effective school administration.

One principal encapsulated this view by stating:

KM29: "School leadership is a broader and more legally defined role than classroom management. Communication comes first. It varies by school type, but a leader must have technical, human, and conceptual competencies and skills. Otherwise, administrators function merely as bureaucrats unless they also understand the curriculum and instruction."

Based on their responses, the transferable teacher characteristics were grouped into three broad domains:

- Human (interpersonal) competencies
- Technical managerial competencies
- Leadership competencies

These dimensions are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Teacher Characteristics Considered Important for Transfer into School Leadership Roles*

| Human Competencies | Technical Competencies | Leadership Competencies |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Effective communication | Knowledge of educational legislation | Instructional leadership |
| Sharing | Awareness of student-related issues | Team leadership |
| Democratic behavior | Classroom management | Visionary thinking |
| Love and respect | Discipline | Passion and enthusiasm |
| Being a role model | Organizational and planning skills | |
| Openness, tolerance, empathy | Problem-solving, responsibility | |
| Sense of belonging | Curriculum and instruction knowledge | |
| Humility, fairness, kindness | Inclusiveness, proactivity, equity | |
| Willingness to volunteer | High motivation and perseverance | |

Human Competencies

Principals strongly emphasized the importance of interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence, particularly in a profession centered on people, such as education. Characteristics

such as communication, empathy, patience, fairness, and respect were frequently mentioned as essential traits that leaders should possess.

> KM1: "They should carry communication skills, a sharing attitude, and d emocratic personality traits."

> KM36: "Principals must act carefully, clearly, and consistently—and love must be prioritized."

> KM64: "Empathy is a quality that both teachers and administrators should possess. In a human-centered institution, empathy enhances the feeling of being valued & ultimately contributes to happiness."

> KM65: "Respect, empathy, tolerance, love, innovation, hard work, flexibility, and leadership are necessary. Managing a school is not easy; you must motivate diverse people and solve their problems effectively."

Technical Competencies

Participants highlighted a range of practical and managerial skills that teachers develop over time, which can significantly contribute to effective leadership when transferred. These include familiarity with legal frameworks, knowledge of curriculum, classroom management, and organizational discipline.

> KM48: "If a teacher is highly motivated to take on a leadership role, this constitutes a significant advantage at the very beginning of their administrative journey."

> KM54: "Organization, leadership, guidance, understanding, being well-organized, honesty, and kindness are qualities that must be transferred."

> KM61: "A teacher who ensures real fairness for students can extend this sense of justice to the whole school."

> KM76: "A desire to teach and learn, self-development, openness to innovation, and work discipline must be transferred. Of course, fairness is also essential."

Leadership Competencies

Finally, school principals placed strong emphasis on the transfer of leadership-related capacities. They argued that leadership is not exclusive to administrators, and many teachers already possess and exhibit leadership skills in their classrooms. Instructional leadership was particularly emphasized as a necessary and foundational component of school leadership. Representative quotations include:

> *KM5: "Leadership qualities should be present in both teachers and administrators."*
> *KM13: "Being visionary is essential. Enthusiasm is a must-have."*
> *KM15: "Those who possess leadership qualities, have mastery over regulations, and are constantly researching."*
> *KM11: "Those capable of providing instructional leadership should retain and transfer this capacity."*
> *KM22: "Their belief in the development of individuals should continue."*

In summary, findings indicate that principals value the transfer of specific competencies that align with effective interpersonal engagement, technical know-how, and strategic leadership. These competencies enable a smoother transition and enhance the administrator's capacity to lead with both vision and empathy.

### *Characteristics That Should Not Be Transferred*

A small number of school principals (n = 4) argued that certain teacher characteristics should be consciously excluded from school leadership roles, as they may hinder effective management or conflict with the expectations of the administrative position. These respondents did not oppose the transition from teaching to leadership per se but emphasized that not all aspects of teacher identity are compatible with administrative responsibilities.

Three key traits were identified as potentially problematic in leadership roles:

- Excessive familiarity: While relational closeness is often valued in teaching, some principals warned that over-familiarity with staff or students in leadership positions could lead to biased decision-making or perceived favoritism.

- Negative personality traits, such as irritability or vindictiveness, were viewed as incompatible with the emotional stability and fairness expected of a school leader.

- Indifference: A disengaged attitude, expressed in Turkish as "bananecilik"— meaning "not my problem"—was flagged as detrimental to collective responsibility in school management.

Illustrative statements include:

> KM27: "Only excessive familiarity should not be transferred—it can be abused."

> KM32: "Traits like irritability and vindictiveness should not exist."

> KM40: "The 'not my problem' attitude should not be transferred."

> KM75: "Although the roles may seem similar, teaching and administration are very different tasks."

These findings suggest a nuanced perspective among some principals, who recognize the importance of selecting and refining personal attributes to meet the unique challenges of school leadership.

### *No Teacher Characteristics Should Be Transferred*

A distinct minority of principals—primarily those serving in high schools—expressed the view that none of the characteristics associated with teaching should be transferred to administrative roles. According to these respondents, teaching and school leadership represent entirely different professional domains, each requiring its own specific set of skills, competencies, and dispositions.

They argued that while teaching is centered on pedagogy and direct student engagement, leadership demands a more strategic, managerial, and visionary orientation that is not necessarily cultivated in the classroom.

Representative quotations include:

> KM6: "Administration has almost nothing to do with teaching..."

> KM9: "Teaching and administration are entirely different roles requiring distinct qualities..."

> KM60: "...Because school leadership requires special talent."

This group of respondents emphasized the importance of distinct professionalization of school leadership, challenging the long-standing assumption in Türkiye that effective teaching automatically prepares individuals for administrative positions.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that a majority of school principals believe certain qualities developed during their teaching careers should be transferred into leadership roles. This perception aligns closely with Parsons' (1951) Role Theory, which asserts that individuals occupy different social statuses, each accompanied by associated roles. In cases of status transition—such as from teacher to principal—some roles are relinquished, while others may be retained if they are functionally compatible with the new position. In this study, principals often highlighted traits such as empathy, communication proficiency, classroom management expertise, a sense of justice, and leadership potential as competencies that not only endure but also enhance the effectiveness of the school leadership role.

At the same time, a smaller subset of principals advocated for a more distinct break from the teaching identity, citing the risk of role conflict and normative incongruence—both of which are fundamental concerns in Parsons' theory. Specifically, attributes such as excessive familiarity, emotional reactivity, and disengagement were seen as misaligned with the expectations of an effective school administrator.

High school principals, in particular, tended to view teaching and school leadership as separate professions, each demanding distinct sets of skills. This position supports the notion that school administration requires a unique form of professionalization—sometimes even described as requiring "special talents"—that cannot be derived directly from teaching experience alone.

From the perspective of Bridges' (1991) Transition Theory, most principals in the current study reflect a partial transition. Rather than abandoning their teaching identity altogether, they seem to carry forward select traits into their administrative role and reinterpret them within the context of leadership. This mirrors the "neutral zone" in Bridges' model, in which individuals reshape prior experiences while adjusting to new responsibilities.

Ibarra's (2004) Career Transition Theory also provides a useful interpretive lens. According to Ibarra, successful transitions involve experiential reapplication, relationship-based evolution, and action-driven learning—all of which were evident in how principals in this study described their continued use of classroom management techniques, instructional leadership approaches, and empathetic communication in leadership roles.

This study's findings are consistent with the work of Riveros et al. (2013), who argue that teachers often develop leadership capacities within their classrooms and later extend them into broader school contexts. Likewise, Barnett et al. (2012) emphasize the cognitive shift that occurs when educators begin to think beyond classroom boundaries and adopt a school-wide leadership mindset.

Additionally, participants noted that the Turkish education system, shaped by the belief that "teaching is the core profession," tends to select administrators based on teaching seniority and success (Ağaoğlu et al., 2012). While Bursalıoğlu (2002) criticizes this approach as a logical

fallacy, Aslanargun (2011) points out that teaching remains the foundation of educational leadership, which is why administrators often return to teaching roles when needed.

Several principals in the study also justified the transfer of classroom management skills, echoing Aydın's (2010) view that the classroom and school are interdependent systems. From this perspective, the school serves as an extension of classroom leadership, and successful classroom practices can be scaled to the broader context of school management.

Another frequently emphasized justification involved transferring communication skills to parents and students. Principals viewed these relational competencies as essential for maintaining effective leadership and fostering a positive school culture. This is strongly supported by the literature, which identifies communication as a key factor in promoting quality education (Gülbahar, 2020), effective leadership (Hoy & Miskel, 2005), and a positive school climate (Afrasiabpour, 2019; Merlo, 2021; Rahmah, 2017).

In addition to retaining teacher traits, participants argued for the enhancement of specific characteristics in leadership roles—particularly fairness, humility, empathy, and egolessness. These attributes are consistent with research by Harris and Lambert (2003) and Reynolds (1996), both of whom underscore the ethical dimensions of school leadership. In the Turkish context, Sezgin et al. (2020) found that principals value justice, respect, and open communication in their daily practices.

Principals grouped the transferable qualities under three interrelated domains: human competencies, technical competencies, and leadership skills. This tripartite classification reflects Katz's (1955) foundational model of administrative effectiveness, which emphasizes the importance of technical, human, and conceptual skills. In line with this model, principals in this study indicated that collaboration, relational intelligence, and ethical sensitivity are just as critical as regulatory knowledge and organizational management.

Research by Akbaba-Altun (2007), Kakumanu (2021), and Effendi and Sahertian (2023) also supports the role of human skills in improving motivation, performance, and stakeholder engagement within schools.

Leadership capabilities, particularly instructional leadership, were also viewed as essential in the transition from teaching to administration. Participants emphasized the importance of school principals serving as pedagogical leaders, underscoring the notion that an educational vision, teacher support, and student achievement are key responsibilities of school leadership. These findings align with numerous studies that have linked instructional leadership to academic outcomes (Hallinger, 2010; Shatzer et al., 2014; Aydın & Sarıer, 2016; Seashore Louis et al., 2010; O'Donnell & White, 2005).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study has highlighted the positive traits that should be retained in school leadership, only a few principals mentioned undesirable characteristics that should be consciously avoided—such as excessive familiarity, irritability, vindictiveness, and indifference. These findings suggest the need for further research into the "negative traits" that may hinder effective school leadership. Identifying such traits can inform both leadership selection processes and

development programs, contributing to the cultivation of more emotionally intelligent and ethically grounded school leaders.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the transition from teaching to school leadership is not merely a procedural promotion, but a multifaceted transformation that involves reconfiguring identity, values, and competencies. Most principals in this study favored the retention and adaptation of essential teacher traits—particularly those rooted in human relationships, pedagogical expertise, and ethical conduct. These findings support the view that educational leadership is not only about managerial efficiency but also about maintaining a deep commitment to the core mission of education: teaching, learning, and human development.

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### *Conflict of Interest*

No conflict of interest

### *Informed Consent*

Consent was obtained from the participants through a consent form.

### *Data availability*

Author has the data and open for the supervision.

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