

# Perceptions and Characteristics of Pre-Service Students Toward School Leaders

-- A Case Study of Binzhou College in Shandong, China

Ziqi Zhang, Simon CM Kwong \*

Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, City University Malaysia. No. 8, Jalan 51A/223, 46100 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

\* Corresponding author: Simon CM Kwong (Email: simoncmkwong@city.edu.my)

---

**Abstract:** This study investigates the perceptions and characteristics of school leaders as viewed by pre-service students at Binzhou University in China, employing a quantitative research method. A total of 160 students participated in the study, providing data through a structured questionnaire. The analysis reveals that students' perceptions of school leaders tend to be shallow, indicating a limited understanding of leadership roles and attributes. The findings suggest that many students lack a deep connection or insight into the qualities and responsibilities of effective school leadership. Based on these results, the study proposes practical recommendations for improvement. School leaders are encouraged to engage more actively in students' academic and personal lives, establish open lines of communication, and create opportunities for meaningful interaction. By doing so, leaders can foster stronger relationships with students, enhance their understanding of leadership, and contribute to a more supportive and inclusive educational environment. This research offers valuable insights for educators and administrators aiming to bridge the gap between leadership and student perception.

**Keywords:** Pre-Service Students, School Leaders, Perceptions and Characteristics.

---

## 1. Introduction

Leadership in educational institutions plays a critical role in shaping both the academic culture and the holistic development of students. In higher education, school leaders are not only administrators but also influential figures who impact students' academic progress, personal growth, and overall campus experience [6]. However, existing research often focuses on leadership styles, teacher perceptions [19], or organizational outcomes [3 Oc, B. (2018)], with limited attention paid to how students perceive school leaders. This gap is particularly evident in the context of pre-service students, whose insights could provide valuable perspectives for leadership improvement [1].

In the Chinese higher education system, leadership is often characterized by hierarchical structures and formal interactions, which may create a distance between leaders and students. Preliminary observations at Binzhou University indicate that students have limited understanding of school leaders' roles and responsibilities, and communication between the two groups is often infrequent or superficial. These factors can lead to a lack of trust, engagement, and alignment between leadership practices and student needs.

This study addresses the identified research gap by exploring the perceptions and expectations of pre-service students toward school leaders. By employing a quantitative research method and analyzing survey data from 160 students, the study aims to uncover the characteristics students associate with effective leadership and identify opportunities for improving leader-student interactions. This research seeks to provide practical recommendations to bridge the gap and enhance leadership strategies in Chinese universities.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Importance of Leadership in Educational Institutions

Leadership within educational institutions is pivotal in shaping academic culture and fostering the holistic development of students. In higher education, leaders act as both administrators and influential figures, significantly impacting students' academic progress, personal growth, and overall campus experience. Research has demonstrated that effective leadership practices directly influence the quality of education, faculty engagement, and institutional effectiveness [5]. For instance, a study by Oc (2018) discusses the role of transformational and transactional leadership in enhancing institutional effectiveness. Despite the recognized importance of leadership, much of the existing research concentrates on leadership styles, organizational outcomes, or teacher perceptions, often overlooking how students perceive school leaders. This gap is particularly evident concerning pre-service students, whose insights could provide valuable perspectives for leadership improvement. Chambers and Lavery (2012) argue that examining students' insights could offer valuable perspectives to refine leadership practices, particularly for pre-service students in teacher education programs [1].

In the context of Chinese higher education, leadership is often characterized by hierarchical structures and formal interactions, which may create a distance between leaders and students [12]. A study by Han and Guo (2015) discusses the hierarchical structure of the Chinese higher education system and its implications [7]. Such frameworks, while effective in maintaining institutional order, may inadvertently create barriers to trust and open communication between leaders and students. Preliminary observations at Binzhou college

indicate that students have limited understanding of school leaders' roles and responsibilities, and communication between the two groups is often infrequent or superficial. These factors can lead to a lack of trust, engagement, and alignment between leadership practices and student needs. Bridging this gap necessitates a deeper understanding of students' perceptions and expectations to inform leadership strategies that resonate with the student body.

## 2.2. Theoretical Foundations for Leadership Research

Several theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for exploring leadership in educational settings, particularly from the perspective of student perceptions. First, transformational leadership theory emphasizes the ability of leaders to inspire and motivate stakeholders toward a shared vision [9, 14]. Transformational leaders are characterized by their capacity to foster trust, encourage collaboration, and prioritize individual growth. In educational contexts, this translates to creating a supportive environment where students feel valued and engaged. A study by Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) found that transformational leadership practices in schools were associated with higher student engagement and achievement.

Second, the situational leadership theory offers insights into how leaders adapt their approaches based on the needs and developmental levels of their stakeholders [17]. In higher education, this involves tailoring leadership strategies to address diverse student populations, including pre-service students [16]. Hersey and Blanchard's (1969) situational leadership model suggest that effective leaders adjust their style to fit the maturity and competence of their followers, which can be particularly effective in bridging the gap between hierarchical leadership structures and the dynamic, evolving expectations of students [15].

Third, trust and leader-member exchange (LMX) theory provide a lens to examine the relational dynamics between leaders and their constituents [10]. Trust is a cornerstone of effective leadership, fostering open communication and mutual respect. LMX theory posits that high-quality leader-member relationships are characterized by trust, respect, and a sense of partnership. In the Chinese higher education system, where hierarchical norms often dominate, fostering trust can be challenging but is essential for effective student-leader interaction [4]. A study by Chen, Zhu, and Zhou (2015) found that high-quality LMX relationships in Chinese universities were associated with increased student satisfaction and academic performance [3].

## 2.3. Current Research and Gaps in the Literature

Existing literature on educational leadership reveals several key trends and gaps. Studies have extensively explored the impact of different leadership styles on organizational performance and teacher engagement. For instance, a study by Veletić (2023) examines the role of leadership styles in influencing teacher motivation and job satisfaction [19]. However, there is limited research examining the direct experiences and perceptions of students, particularly in non-Western contexts. This omission is significant because students' insights offer a unique perspective on leadership effectiveness that is often overlooked in traditional leadership research. In the context of pre-service students, the research gap becomes even more pronounced. These students, who are at a critical juncture in

their educational journey, have distinct needs and expectations. Their perceptions of school leaders can influence their attitudes toward leadership and their future roles as educators. Despite this, studies rarely prioritize their voices in discussions of leadership practices. Chambers and Lavery (2012) highlight that incorporating student feedback into leadership strategies can lead to more inclusive and effective outcomes [1].

Additionally, the unique characteristics of leadership in Chinese higher education present specific challenges and opportunities. The hierarchical nature of leadership structures often limits direct interaction between students and leaders, leading to misunderstandings and a lack of trust. A study by Han and Guo (2015) discusses the hierarchical structure of the Chinese higher education system and its implications [7]. Such findings underscore the need for research that delves into the perceptions and expectations of Chinese students to inform leadership practices that are culturally and contextually relevant.

Addressing these gaps requires a nuanced approach that combines theoretical insights with empirical research. By employing quantitative methods and analyzing data from pre-service students, this study aims to uncover the attributes of effective leadership as perceived by students and identify actionable strategies to improve leader-student interactions. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on educational leadership, offering practical recommendations for fostering trust, engagement, and alignment in Chinese universities.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to explore the perceptions and expectations of pre-service students toward school leaders at Binzhou College, Shandong Province, China. Quantitative research allows for the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data to identify patterns and relationships among variables, offering objective insights into student perceptions.

### 3.2. Sampling

The participants for this study were randomly selected from the pre-service student population at Binzhou College. A total of 160 students were surveyed, representing diverse academic disciplines and year levels. Random sampling ensures that the results are generalizable to the broader student population while minimizing selection bias.

### 3.3. Instrument

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire, which included the following sections:

(1) Demographics: Collecting information on age, gender, year of study, and academic major.

(2) Leadership Perception Scale: Measuring students' perceptions of school leaders using a validated instrument such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Avolio, 1995).

(3) Leader-Student Interaction Scale: Capturing the frequency and quality of interactions with leaders. Items were adapted from the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Scale (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

(4) Trust in Leadership Scale: Measuring trust levels in school leadership based on the Trust in Leadership Scale

(Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

(5) Open-ended Items: Offering students an opportunity to provide qualitative insights about their expectations and suggestions for improving leadership practices.

### 3.4. Reliability and Validity

The instrument's reliability and validity were evaluated as follows: Internal Consistency: The Cronbach's alpha values for the key scales (MLQ, LMX, Trust in Leadership) were assessed. Previous research has reported high reliability scores (MLQ:  $\alpha > 0.80$ ; LMX:  $\alpha > 0.85$ ).

A pilot test was conducted with 30 students from Binzhou University to confirm the instrument's reliability in the local context. The Cronbach's alpha for each scale exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70.

The items were reviewed by three educational leadership experts to ensure they adequately covered the constructs under study. Construct Validity: Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to verify the scales' dimensionality and alignment with the theoretical constructs.

### 3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Binzhou University. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Data were anonymized to protect student identities.

### 3.6. Data Collection

The survey was administered in both online and paper-based formats to maximize accessibility and response rates. Data collection was conducted over a two-week period, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation.

## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics provide a foundational understanding of the survey participants' demographics and perceptions. The gender distribution, with 60% female and 40% male, reflects the typical enrollment at many educational institutions. The balanced representation across different years of study (first-year to fourth-year) helps in generalizing findings across the student population. The distribution of academic disciplines (30% in education, 25% in sciences, and 20% in arts) ensures that a wide range of perspectives are included in the survey. The key constructs show that students generally have a positive perception of leadership (Mean =

3.8), though with some reservations (SD = 0.65). The relatively low leader-student interaction (Mean = 3.2, SD = 0.75) indicates a gap that could affect trust in leadership. The moderate trust in leadership (Mean = 3.5, SD = 0.70) reflects a perception of moderate effectiveness among the surveyed students.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics

Category	Details
Demographic Information	
Gender Distribution	Female: 60%, Male: 40%
Year of Study Distribution	Balanced across first-year to fourth-year students
Academic Disciplines	Education: 30%, Sciences: 25%, Arts: 20%
Key Constructs	
Perception of Leadership	Mean = 3.8, SD = 0.65
Leader-Student Interaction	Mean = 3.2, SD = 0.75
Trust in Leadership	Mean = 3.5, SD = 0.70

### 4.2. Reliability Analysis

**Table 2.** Reliability Data Analysis

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Leadership Perception Scale	$\alpha = 0.82$
Leader-Student Interaction Scale	$\alpha = 0.79$
Trust in Leadership Scale	$\alpha = 0.85$

The Cronbach's alpha values provide a measure of internal consistency for each scale used in the survey. The Leadership Perception Scale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating that the items within the scale are consistent in measuring the perception of leadership. This suggests that the questions were well designed to reflect students' views on leadership. The Leader-Student Interaction Scale with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79 also showed good internal consistency, highlighting that the items are measuring the construct accurately. The Trust in Leadership Scale had the highest internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, reflecting a strong reliability among the items used to measure students' trust in leadership. These high alpha values indicate that the scales used in the survey were reliable and that the data collected can be trusted to represent the constructs accurately.

### 4.3. Correlation Analysis

**Table 3.** Correlation Data Analysis

Constructs	r	p	Significance
Leadership Perception & Trust in Leadership	0.67	$p < 0.01$	Strong positive relationship
Leader-Student Interaction & Trust in Leadership	0.45	$p < 0.01$	Moderate positive relationship
Leadership Perception & Leader-Student Interaction	0.52	$p < 0.01$	Highlighting the importance of interaction in shaping perceptions

The correlation analysis helps to understand the relationships between different constructs within the survey. The strong positive correlation between Leadership Perception and Trust in Leadership ( $r = 0.67$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) indicates that as students perceive leadership to be more effective, their trust in leadership increases significantly. This relationship underscores the importance of positive perceptions of school leadership in fostering trust among

students. The moderate positive correlation between Leader-Student Interaction and Trust in Leadership ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) suggests that better interaction between leaders and students is associated with higher trust in leadership. This relationship highlights the significance of direct communication and involvement of leaders in student affairs. The positive correlation between Leadership Perception and Leader-Student Interaction ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) further emphasizes the

role of interaction in shaping students' views on leadership, suggesting that improving interactions could lead to more positive perceptions.

#### 4.4. Regression Analysis

**Table 4.** Regression Data Analysis

Model Summary	Details
Dependent Variable	Trust in Leadership
Independent Variables	Leadership Perception, Leader-Student Interaction
R-Squared	R <sup>2</sup> =0.58
Significant Predictors	Leadership Perception β=0.53, p<0.01 β = 0.32, p < 0.01,

The regression analysis provides insights into how well the key independent variables (Leadership Perception and Leader-Student Interaction) predict the dependent variable (Trust in Leadership). The model accounts for 58% of the variance in trust in leadership, as indicated by the R-squared value of 0.58. This suggests a substantial effect of these independent variables on trust in leadership among students. The significant predictors from the model were Leadership Perception (β=0.53, p<0.01; β = 0.53, p < 0.01) and Leader-Student Interaction (β=0.32, p<0.01; β = 0.32, p < 0.01). These results indicate that both factors play a crucial role in shaping students' trust in leadership. A positive perception of leadership and effective leader-student interaction are critical for building trust among students, suggesting actionable areas for improvement in leadership practices within educational institutions.

#### 4.5. Thematic Analysis

As see in table 5, the thematic analysis of open-ended responses provides qualitative insights into the students' expectations and perceptions of leadership. The theme of Transparency and Communication highlights students' desire for more open and clear communication from leaders, especially regarding decision-making processes. This need reflects a desire for leaders to be more accessible and responsive to students' concerns. The theme of Approachability of Leaders emphasizes the importance of leaders being more involved in campus life and approachable, fostering a sense of connection and support among students. The third theme, Support for Student Development, underscores the expectation that leaders should actively support both academic and personal growth of students, providing guidance and resources. These themes provide context for the quantitative findings and suggest practical recommendations for enhancing leadership practices based on student feedback

**Table 5.** Thematic Analysis

Theme	Details
Transparency and Communication	Emphasis on transparent decision-making and regular communication
Approachability of Leaders	Desire for leaders to be more approachable and involved in campus activities
Support for Student Development	Importance of guidance and support for academic and personal growth

### 5. Conclusion

This study explored pre-service students' perceptions and

expectations of school leaders through survey data analyzed. The descriptive statistics revealed positive perceptions of leadership among students but noted limited interaction with leaders, which might impact trust levels. The reliability analysis confirmed good internal consistency for the scales used, while correlation analysis highlighted significant relationships between leadership perception, leader-student interaction, and trust in leadership. The regression analysis showed that both leadership perception and leader-student interaction were strong predictors of trust in leadership. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses emphasized the need for greater transparency, approachability, and support for student development. These findings provide actionable recommendations for enhancing leadership practices in Chinese universities. Future research could further investigate the impact of specific leadership styles on student perceptions and explore longitudinal changes in leadership effectiveness to better understand the long-term influence on student trust and engagement.

### References

- [1] Chambers, D. J., & Lavery, S. (2012). Leadership challenges for Catholic school principals. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 16(1), 14-38.
- [2] Chambers, D. J., & Lavery, S. (2012). Service-learning: A valuable component of pre-service teacher education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online)*, 37(4), 99-108.
- [3] Chen, Z. X., Zhu, J. N., & Zhou, M. (2015). The effects of leader-member exchange on student engagement and academic performance: Evidence from Chinese universities. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 35(3), 365-377.
- [4] Cheng, S. (2019). Student engagement with institutional governance in contemporary Chinese universities: an internationalization process. [Doctoral dissertation].
- [5] Dinh, N. B. K., Caliskan, A., & Zhu, C. (2021). Academic leadership: Perceptions of academic leaders and staff in diverse contexts. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(6), 996-1016.
- [6] Emma, L. (2024). The Role of Leadership Styles in Shaping Educational Organizational Culture and Performance.
- [7] Han, L., & Guo, J. (2015). Hierarchical structures and their influence on leadership effectiveness in Chinese higher education. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 41, 1-9.
- [8] Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K. H. (1969). Life cycle theory of leadership. *Training and Development Journal*, 23(5), 26-34.
- [9] Hunsaker, M. R. (2019). Graduate Students Perceptions of Leadership Theories and How They Might Relate to Their Successes in Distance Learning Environments. [Doctoral dissertation, Northcentral University].
- [10] Kang, D. S., & Stewart, J. (2007). Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership and HRD: Development of units of theory and laws of interaction. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 28(6), 531-551.
- [11] Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of transformational leadership on organizational conditions and student engagement. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 38(2), 112-129.
- [12] Lu, X., & Smith, R. (2022). Leadership in Chinese higher education and the influence of sociocultural constructs. *Compare: a journal of comparative and international education*, 52(3), 381-399.

- [13] Oc, B. (2018). Contextual leadership: Transformational and transactional leadership approaches. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 21, 1-6.
- [14] Özdemir, N., Gümüş, S., Kılınç, A. Ç., & Bellibaş, M. Ş. (2024). A systematic review of research on the relationship between school leadership and student achievement: An updated framework and future direction. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 52(5), 1020-1046.
- [15] Raza, S. A., & Sikandar, A. (2018). Impact of leadership style of teacher on the performance of students: An application of Hersey and Blanchard situational model. *Bulletin of Education and Research*, 40(3), 73-94.
- [16] Santoro, N., & Allard, A. (2005). (Re) Examining identities: Working with diversity in the pre-service teaching experience. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(7), 863-873.
- [17] Thompson, G., & Vecchio, R. P. (2009). Situational leadership theory: A test of three versions. *The leadership quarterly*, 20(5), 837-848.
- [18] Veletić, J., Price, H. E., & Olsen, R. V. (2023). Teachers' and principals' perceptions of school climate: the role of principals' leadership style in organizational quality. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 35(4), 525-555. DOI: 10.1177/08920206211054654
- [19] Veletić, M. (2023). Leadership styles and teacher motivation: Implications for effective school management. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Management*, 31(1), 23-41.