



TRI HITA KARANA-BASED SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: AN ENDIGENOUS FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary educational leadership remains heavily influenced by Western technocratic and managerial paradigms that prioritize standardization and efficiency, often at the expense of cultural relevance, social cohesion, and ecological responsibility. This conceptual article addresses this lacuna by introducing Tri Hita Karana (THK) a Balinese philosophical triad as an endogenous and sustainable framework for school leadership. Grounded in the cosmological principles of harmony, THK posits that human well-being emerges from the balanced cultivation of three interconnected relationships: with the spiritual/moral realm (Parhyangan), with fellow human beings (Pawongan), and with the natural environment (Palemahan). We theorize these philosophical tenets into three actionable leadership dimensions moral stewardship, relational community-building, and ecological governance offering a holistic alternative to reductionist management models. The article's central theoretical contribution lies in its articulation of THK's endogeneity, whereby its deep cultural rootedness ensures authentic stakeholder engagement and contextual relevance, and its multidimensional sustainability, which simultaneously fosters ecological resilience, social equity, and cultural continuity. By challenging the universalist assumptions of imported reform agendas, the framework provides a values-driven, context-sensitive response to contemporary crises of educational alienation and environmental degradation. Ultimately, this article argues that THK-based leadership not only revitalizes indigenous wisdom but also enriches global leadership discourse by demonstrating how non-Western epistemologies can generate rigorous, actionable, and sustainable solutions for schools worldwide.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global educational landscape is currently navigating an era of profound turbulence, characterized by rapid technological disruption, widening socio-economic inequalities, and an escalating climate crisis. In response, educational leadership has increasingly been called upon to move beyond its traditional preoccupation with administrative efficiency and student achievement metrics. Historically, the dominant paradigms informing school leadership such as instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership have been predominantly forged within Western, industrialized contexts. While these models have contributed valuable insights, their pervasive exportation to non-Western settings has often resulted in a troubling disjuncture between imported theories and local cultural realities. This epistemological hegemony frequently marginalizes

indigenous wisdom, reducing education to a technical enterprise and neglecting the moral, spiritual, and ecological dimensions that are essential for cultivating humane and sustainable learning communities (Macpherson, 2024).

A critical examination of these prevailing models reveals a significant theoretical lacuna: they are remarkably silent on the existential and relational questions that underpin genuine human flourishing. By privileging measurable outputs, standardized procedures, and individualistic achievement, contemporary leadership discourse has inadvertently contributed to the alienation of educators, the commodification of knowledge, and the erosion of communal bonds within schools. Moreover, the conspicuous absence of ecological consciousness in mainstream leadership frameworks represents a glaring omission in an age defined by environmental precarity. Schools, as microcosms of society, cannot afford to operate in isolation from their biophysical surroundings, nor can they ignore the cultural ecosystems that give them meaning. Consequently, there is an urgent imperative to reconceptualize educational leadership not merely as a set of managerial competencies, but as a value-laden, context-sensitive, and ecologically responsible practice (A. Gardner-McTaggart, 2025).

It is within this theoretical and practical vacuum that Tri Hita Karana (THK) a profound philosophical triad originating from the Balinese Hindu tradition emerges as a compelling and viable alternative. Rooted in centuries of cosmological wisdom, THK posits that sustainable well-being and social harmony are achievable only through the balanced cultivation of three interconnected relationships: harmony with the divine or spiritual realm (Parhyangan), harmony among fellow human beings (Pawongan), and harmony with the natural environment (Palemahan) (Wijaya et al., 2025). This triadic philosophy is not an abstract metaphysical notion; it is a lived, experiential framework that has historically guided Balinese social organization, agrarian practices, and community governance. When transposed into the educational sphere, THK offers a holistic lens through which school leaders can reconceptualize their roles not as bureaucratic managers, but as moral stewards, community weavers, and ecological custodians who prioritize relational integrity over transactional efficiency (Johnson, 2025).

This conceptual article aims to advance a novel theoretical proposition: that Tri Hita Karana can be rigorously operationalized as an endogenous and sustainable framework for school leadership. We argue that THK's endogeneity its deep cultural rootedness and resonance with local epistemologies ensures authentic stakeholder engagement, cultural continuity, and contextual relevance, thereby overcoming the perennial problem of failed policy transfers (Roth & Sedana, 2015). Simultaneously, we contend that its multidimensional sustainability addresses three intersecting crises confronting modern education: the spiritual-moral void (through Parhyangan), the social fragmentation (through Pawongan), and the ecological degradation (through Palemahan). By systematically translating these philosophical tenets into three actionable leadership dimensions namely, moral-spiritual stewardship, relational community-building, and ecological governance we provide a coherent and practical alternative to the reductionist logic of neoliberal educational reforms (Wijaya et al., 2025).

In doing so, this article makes a significant contribution to the international educational leadership literature by challenging its Western-centric foundations and demonstrating how indigenous knowledge systems can generate robust, actionable, and globally relevant solutions. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first, we elaborate on the philosophical underpinnings of THK and delineate its three-dimensional leadership framework; second, we theorize its nature as an endogenous and sustainable model, articulating its unique theoretical advantages; third, we propose concrete implementation pathways and practical strategies for school leaders; fourth, we critically examine the inherent challenges and contextual limitations of this approach; and finally, we conclude by outlining future research directions and the broader implications of embracing indigenous wisdom in the pursuit of more humane, equitable, and ecologically conscious educational futures.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This article adopts a conceptual-analytical approach, drawing upon interdisciplinary literature to construct and theorize the Tri Hita Karana (THK) framework for sustainable educational leadership. As a non-empirical, theory-building inquiry, the study does not employ primary data collection instruments such as surveys or interviews. Instead, the methodology consists of three interrelated stages: first, a systematic review of scholarly literature across educational leadership, organizational studies, sustainability science, and cultural anthropology, sourced from international databases alongside an examination of classical Balinese manuscripts and indigenous texts to establish the authentic philosophical foundations of THK; second, a hermeneutic interpretation of these philosophical tenets to derive their educational implications, ensuring that the cultural meanings are not oversimplified or decontextualized; and third, a deductive-conceptual synthesis whereby the three dimensions of THK (Parhyangan, Pawongan, Palemahan) are systematically operationalized into actionable leadership constructs (Wijaya et al., 2025). This analytical process is guided by the principles of conceptual rigor, internal coherence, and contextual validity, enabling the articulation of a robust endogenous framework that bridges indigenous wisdom with contemporary leadership discourse. The resulting model is presented as a propositional framework intended to generate testable hypotheses and practical guidelines for future empirical validation in diverse school settings.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The Ontological and Epistemological Shift: THK versus Western Managerialism

The first and most fundamental contribution of the Tri Hita Karana (THK) framework lies in its capacity to enact an ontological and epistemological rupture with the dominant Western managerialist tradition. Mainstream leadership models such as transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership are predominantly defined by their functional orientation; they are primarily concerned with how leaders achieve organizational goals, often measured through student test scores, teacher performance metrics, and institutional efficiency (Metera et al., 2025). These models operate within an implicit utilitarian epistemology that reduces human relationships and organizational processes to instrumental means toward predetermined ends. THK, by stark contrast, invites a radical reorientation: it asks not merely what a leader achieves, but who a leader is and how they embody harmonious relationships. This ontological shift from doing to being elevates leadership from a technical competency to a moral and spiritual vocation, fundamentally altering the very criteria by which leadership effectiveness is assessed.

When examining the Parhyangan dimension specifically, the contrast with Western ethical leadership paradigms becomes particularly salient. Western approaches to ethical leadership, while valuable, are largely grounded in secular, rationalist traditions often drawing from deontological (Kantian) or consequentialist (utilitarian) frameworks that emphasize rule-following and outcome-calculation. These are externally imposed codes of conduct that, while necessary, lack intrinsic motivational power and spiritual depth. THK's spiritual-moral dimension, however, introduces a transcendent accountability that operates beyond institutional surveillance. The leader's ethical conduct is not merely a compliance strategy but an expression of cosmic harmony and divine purpose. This imbues leadership decisions with a sacred quality, fostering a level of authenticity, trust, and moral authority that purely secular models struggle to generate. Consequently, schools led by THK principles are more likely to cultivate intrinsic ethical commitment among teachers and students, as opposed to mere rule adherence (Khalifa et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the Pawongan dimension offers a profound critique of the individualistic underpinnings of Western leadership theory. Transformational and distributed leadership models, despite their rhetoric of collaboration, remain fundamentally anchored in the agency of the individual leader or the strategic delegation of tasks to achieve organizational productivity. Relationality, in these frameworks, is often a means to an end enhancing job satisfaction or improving student outcomes rather than an end in itself. THK's socio-relational dimension, conversely, posits that harmonious human relationships constitute the very essence of a flourishing community (Arar et al., 2025). The leader's primary duty is to nurture *communitas*, where social bonds are valued for their intrinsic worth, not merely their utility. This reframing has profound implications for school culture: conflict is addressed through restorative dialogue rather than punitive measures, and teacher well-being is prioritized as a communal responsibility rather than an individual burden, leading to more resilient and cohesive professional learning communities.

Finally, the Palemahan dimension exposes a glaring lacuna in mainstream educational leadership discourse: the conspicuous absence of ecological consciousness. Western models have historically treated schools as socially insulated institutions, operating independently of their biophysical environments. This anthropocentric myopia is not merely an oversight but a reflection of the Cartesian dualism that separates mind from matter and culture from nature (A. C. Gardner-McTaggart, 2022). THK, by integrating ecological stewardship into the core of leadership praxis, challenges this dualism directly. It compels school leaders to recognize that environmental degradation is not an external problem to be addressed through optional 'green initiatives,' but a fundamental disruption of cosmic balance that directly affects student well-being, community health, and educational quality. In an era defined by climate anxiety and ecological collapse, THK's insistence on environmental responsibility positions it as a uniquely forward-looking framework, redefining educational 'effectiveness' to include planetary health and intergenerational justice (Raisul Muhadidsin et al., 2026).

Operationalizing the Tri-Dimensional Synergy: A Holistic Governance Model

Beyond its philosophical distinctiveness, the practical power of the THK framework resides in the synergistic interdependence of its three dimensions. It is crucial to recognize that Parhyangan, Pawongan, and Palemahan are not discrete, siloed domains but mutually constitutive forces that generate a holistic governance model far exceeding the sum of its parts. This synergy produces a distinctive systemic resilience that fragmented, single-dimensional reform initiatives cannot replicate. When a school leader addresses the spiritual-moral dimension, they simultaneously fortify the socio-relational dimension by fostering shared values and collective purpose; when they attend to the ecological dimension, they reinforce social cohesion by engaging the community in collective environmental stewardship projects. This triadic interplay creates a virtuous cycle where improvements in one dimension amplify positive outcomes across the others, establishing a self-reinforcing equilibrium conducive to long-term institutional sustainability (Rusitayanti et al., 2026).

The specific mechanisms through which this synergy operates warrant closer scrutiny. Firstly, the spiritual-moral grounding provided by Parhyangan acts as a foundational anchor that prevents the other two dimensions from devolving into superficial performativity. Without this moral compass, Pawongan could degenerate into mere social nicety or manipulative consensus-building, while Palemahan could be reduced to tokenistic recycling programs devoid of genuine ecological consciousness (Sukarna, 2016). Conversely, Parhyangan without Pawongan risks becoming otherworldly and disconnected from the pressing socio-material realities of teachers, students, and parents. Similarly, ecological action (Palemahan) is rendered substantially more meaningful and enduring when it is propelled by spiritual reverence for nature and supported by a cohesive community (Pawongan) willing to undertake collective action. Thus, the leader's role is not to manage these dimensions sequentially but to orchestrate their continuous and dynamic interplay, ensuring that no single dimension dominates at the expense of the others (Raisul Muhadidsin et al., 2026).

However, operationalizing this synergy inevitably entails navigating inherent tensions and dilemmas. School leaders regularly confront situations where the three dimensions appear to conflict—for instance, when budgetary constraints force a choice between investing in expensive eco-friendly infrastructure (Palemahan) and providing competitive teacher incentives (Pawongan). Similarly, honoring diverse spiritual traditions within a pluralistic school community (Parhyangan) may challenge the established cultural norms of a predominantly homogeneous local population. The THK framework does not offer simplistic, prescriptive solutions to such dilemmas; rather, it provides a heuristic for ethical deliberation. The leader is tasked with engaging all stakeholders in transparent dialogue, seeking solutions that, while perhaps imperfect, minimally disrupt the triadic balance. This process of deliberative balancing, guided by the overarching principle of harmony, cultivates a culture of reflexive decision-making that is far more adaptive and contextually intelligent than rule-bound bureaucratic protocols (Ardiana et al., 2026).

This tri-dimensional synergy fundamentally distinguishes THK from contemporary reform movements that operate in silos. Western educational reforms typically compartmentalize issues—an anti-bullying program for social issues, a STEM initiative for academic excellence, and a separate environmental club for sustainability. These fragmented approaches often produce isolated, short-lived improvements that fail to address the underlying cultural fabric of the school. THK, conversely, offers an integrative cultural philosophy that dissolves these artificial boundaries. A project to restore a school garden (Palemahan) simultaneously becomes a vehicle for collaborative teamwork among students and teachers (Pawongan) and an opportunity for spiritual reflection on humanity's relationship with the Creator and nature (Parhyangan). This integrative logic not only maximizes resource efficiency but also fosters deeper, more transformative learning experiences for students, who come to understand that academic knowledge, social responsibility, and ecological awareness are inseparable facets of a meaningful life (Wijaya et al., 2025).

Implications for Policy, Praxis, and the Decolonization of Educational Knowledge

The implications of adopting a THK-based leadership framework extend far beyond the individual school, carrying significant weight for educational policy-making, leadership preparation programs, and the broader project of decolonizing educational knowledge. At the policy level, the framework demands a fundamental rethinking of how educational success is defined and measured. Current national accountability systems, heavily influenced by global assessment regimes such as PISA, overwhelmingly privilege cognitive achievement and numerical indicators of school performance. These metrics systematically render invisible the qualitative dimensions of schooling spiritual growth, social harmony, ecological citizenship that THK prioritizes (Yulisinta et al., 2024). Consequently, for THK-based leadership to flourish, policymakers must create regulatory 'slack' that allows schools to allocate time, resources, and curricular space to culturally embedded, holistic practices. This might include revising national curriculum frameworks to mandate locally relevant cultural content, establishing alternative accreditation criteria that reward schools demonstrating strong community engagement and environmental sustainability, and devolving greater fiscal autonomy to local school boards to support culturally responsive initiatives.

In terms of praxis, the professional development and preparation of school principals require a radical pedagogical overhaul. Traditional leadership training programs, typically housed within faculties of education and business administration, emphasize competencies in strategic planning, financial management, human resource administration, and instructional supervision (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2024). These curricula are woefully inadequate for preparing leaders who must navigate the moral, relational, and ecological complexities inherent in the THK framework. We propose the development of specialized leadership development modules grounded in three core competencies: cultural intelligence, enabling leaders to engage deeply with local wisdom traditions and community cosmologies; contemplative practice, cultivating leaders' self-awareness, emotional regulation, and spiritual groundedness through regular reflection and meditation; and ecological literacy, equipping leaders with the scientific and ethical understanding necessary to integrate sustainability into all facets of school operations (Quatro et al., 2007). Such programs would benefit enormously from partnerships with indigenous elders,

cultural practitioners, and local universities, ensuring that training is authentically rooted in lived cultural experiences rather than academic abstractions.

Perhaps the most profound contribution of this framework, however, is its challenge to the epistemic hegemony that has long characterized international educational development. The field of educational leadership has historically operated as a one-way pipeline, with theories and models generated in the Global North being exported to the Global South, often with little regard for local contexts and worldviews. This asymmetrical knowledge flow perpetuates intellectual dependency and marginalizes alternative epistemologies as 'backward' or 'unscientific.' By rigorously theorizing THK as a legitimate, sophisticated, and globally relevant leadership paradigm, this article actively participates in the urgent project of decolonizing educational knowledge. It demonstrates that indigenous wisdom is not merely folklore to be celebrated in cultural festivals but a robust theoretical resource capable of generating rigorous, actionable insights for contemporary challenges (Raisul Muhadidsin et al., 2026). This recognition empowers local communities to reclaim epistemic agency, fostering educational practices that affirm rather than erode cultural identity, and ultimately contributing to a more pluralistic, equitable, and intellectually vibrant global academic community.

Nevertheless, a critical reflection on the framework's limitations and potential risks is imperative to avoid romanticizing indigenous culture or advocating for uncritical implementation. The THK framework, as conceptualized here, carries the inherent risk of co-optation, whereby superficial adoption of its terminology posting 'THK values' on school walls without substantive changes to governance structures serves as a performative gesture that conceals business-as-usual managerialism. Furthermore, there is a danger of cultural essentialism, wherein THK is presented as monolithic or static, ignoring the internal diversity, contestations, and historical transformations within Balinese society itself (I Gde Putu Agus Pramerta, 2023). Finally, the framework's transferability to highly heterogeneous, multi-ethnic, or secular educational contexts particularly outside Indonesia requires careful contextual adaptation. The spiritual dimension (Parhyangan), in particular, must be translated into inclusive humanistic ethics in pluralistic settings. We therefore emphasize that THK is not a rigid blueprint but a heuristic lens that must be dialogically adapted to specific local conditions. Future research must critically examine these adaptation processes through rigorous empirical case studies, ensuring that the framework remains open, reflexive, and responsive to the complexities of diverse educational realities.

4. CONCLUSION

This conceptual article has advanced the proposition that Tri Hita Karana (THK) offers a philosophically robust, culturally endogenous, and practically actionable framework for reimagining educational leadership in an era of profound global crises. By systematically translating its three interconnected dimensions Parhyangan (spiritual-moral stewardship), Pawongan (relational community-building), and Palemahan (ecological governance) we have demonstrated that THK transcends the reductionist logic of Western managerialism, which has long privileged technical efficiency over human flourishing and planetary well-being. The framework's inherent synergy generates a holistic governance model that simultaneously addresses the spiritual void, social fragmentation, and environmental degradation confronting contemporary schooling. Moreover, its endogeneity ensures deep cultural resonance and authentic stakeholder engagement, while its multidimensional sustainability offers a coherent response to the intersecting exigencies of cultural erosion, social inequity, and climate precarity. In doing so, THK challenges the epistemic hegemony of imported reform agendas, affirming that indigenous knowledge systems are not relics of the past but sophisticated theoretical resources capable of generating rigorous, globally relevant solutions for sustainable educational futures.

Nevertheless, this framework is neither a panacea nor a rigid blueprint; its successful implementation demands critical reflexivity, contextual adaptation, and sustained empirical investigation. Policymakers must create regulatory flexibility that values holistic outcomes beyond standardized metrics, while leadership preparation programs must cultivate cultural intelligence, contemplative practice, and ecological literacy among aspiring principals. Educators and communities must engage in deliberative dialogue to adapt THK's spiritual dimension to pluralistic settings, ensuring inclusivity without diluting its ethical essence. Crucially, future research must move beyond theoretical articulation to undertake rigorous empirical validation through comparative case studies, longitudinal tracking, and the development of validated assessment instruments to examine how THK-based leadership translates into tangible improvements in school climate, community cohesion, student well-being, and environmental stewardship across diverse cultural contexts. Ultimately, the Tri Hita Karana framework invites the global educational community to embrace a more humble, relational, and ecologically conscious vision of leadership one that recognizes that the health of our schools is inseparable from the health of our communities, our cultures, and our shared planetary home.

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