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Comparing Leadership-Relevant Psychological Attributes Between Military School and Non-Military School Students

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Abstract

This study looks at whether there is a measurable difference between the psychological attributes of military and non-military schooling in regard to attributes that are important to leadership development. A 30 item, six constructs, cross sectional comparative design was used where 450 students (259 from Military Schools and 191 from Non-Military Schools, Classes IX-XII) completed a questionnaire (30 items) of the following constructs: self-efficacy, resilience, emotional intelligence, cognitive competence, social preference and perceived leadership behaviour. The data were analysed using independent-samples t-tests, Cohen's d effect sizes, post-hoc power analysis, chi-square test of association, one-way ANOVA and Pearson correlation. There were 10 items (33%) that showed an important difference between the groups with statistically significant differences in that item, with a majority of these effects being small in magnitude, and mostly in the domain of action-oriented behaviours (motivation, decisive action, inspiring others) favouring the Military students, while a smaller number of items favoured the Non-Military students (believing in achieving goals, learning agility). Construct-level scores were very similar when computed (ratios ranging from 0.99 to 1.03) on each of the six constructs. Overall, the findings indicate no clear support for the uniform leadership advantage model for military pattern schooling and do support a model of an advantage by item with specific implications for curriculum design and implementation in the NEP 2020.

Keywords: military education; leadership development; self-efficacy; resilience; emotional intelligence; adolescents; comparative study

1. Introduction

The military-pattern schooling such as the Sainik Schools, Military Schools, Rashtriya Indian Military College and National Cadet Corps (NCC) affiliated schools have been an important part of the Indian educational policy discourse as a means to develop disciplined citizens with leadership qualities. Incorporation of life skills and twenty first century skills such as self-efficacy, resilience and social-emotional competence is an explicit part of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and military-ethos institutions are often mentioned as models for integrating these skills. However, the evidence for a leadership dividend solely on the part of schooling in the military as compared to a similar cohort from a non-military school is limited. Most of the published literature is descriptive in nature or limited to a single institution with no proper sized matched control group. This study will directly tackle that gap. We test these six constructs of leadership that are psychologically relevant (self-efficacy, resilience, emotional intelligence, cognitive competence, social preference and perceived leadership behaviour) for systematic differences in students' answers between the two school types, using a sample of 450 students from Military and Non-Military schools. We do not take it upon ourselves to declare that we have one advantage, one uniform advantage, but instead test each of the thirty underlying items for themselves, so that we can get a detailed, more defensible picture of where, if any, there might be an advantage at a military school. The study is also driven by a methodological issue that has been present in many comparative school studies: composite construct scores - by construction - average across items which can go in different directions, and may report "no difference" even if there are several individual, substantive differences that cancel out. This paper will seek to demonstrate not only if there is a difference, but at what level looking at the item level will reveal it, and where it will not.

1.1 Objectives and Hypotheses

Based on the constructs used, six null hypotheses (H01–H06) were formulated that there was no significant difference between the Military and Non-Military students with respect to Self-Efficacy, Resilience, Emotional Intelligence, Cognitive Competence, Social Preference and Perceived Leadership Behaviour respectively. To closely match the item level focus of this paper, each hypothesis was tested not only using the composite construct score, but also using the five items that comprise each hypothesis; the composite score is presented as a summary of the item scores.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 International Evidence on Cadet-Pattern Programmes

The advantages of structured cadet-pattern programmes can be compared with the literature on such programmes from around the world. Research on the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) in the United States has linked participation with positive and moderate levels of self-discipline and civic responsibility for some groups, and to varying extents depending on the cohort and amount of exposure. A study of the Combined Cadet Force in the UK also finds improvements focused on confidence and teamwork with no general improvements in all traits measured. What emerges from this literature is that the impact of structured, military patterned environments is real, but usually small-to-moderate and construct specific – not necessarily a general pattern of advantage with respect to every leadership relevant construct. A second recurring theme in this literature is duration and intensity of exposure: programmes that embed cadet-pattern activity across several years of schooling tend to report more durable effects than short, single-term interventions, and effects are generally larger on behavioural or conduct-related outcomes (attendance, discipline referrals, task completion) than on more abstract self-report traits such as general self-efficacy or emotional intelligence. This distinction is relevant to the present study, since the six constructs examined here span both behavioural/task-oriented items (e.g., persistence, decisive action) and more reflective, trait-like items (e.g., belief in one's long-term potential), and the literature would predict exactly the asymmetric pattern of effects stronger on the former, weaker or reversed on the latter that the Results section reports below.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of the Six Constructs

The six constructs examined here draw on well-established theoretical traditions: self-efficacy on Bandura's (1997) social-cognitive theory; resilience on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping; emotional intelligence on the four-branch model of Mayer and Salovey (1997) and its applied extension by Goleman (1995); cognitive competence on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of higher-order cognition; social preference on Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development; and perceived leadership behaviour on the transformational–transactional distinction developed by Burns (1978) and extended by Bass (1985).

Each of these traditions offers a distinct prediction about where a military-pattern schooling effect, if present, should be concentrated. Bandura's framework predicts that mastery experiences under structured, repeated, graded challenge a hallmark of military-pattern training should raise self-efficacy specifically for the domains in which that challenge occurs (physical endurance, rule-governed performance), with weaker transfer to domains outside that experience (academic or social self-efficacy). Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model similarly predicts that resilience gains from a structured environment should be most visible in problem-focused coping (direct, active responses to a stressor) rather than emotion-focused coping, since the environment trains the former far more explicitly than the latter. These construct-specific predictions motivate the item-level, rather than purely composite-level, analytic strategy adopted in this paper.

2.3 Additional Theoretical Perspectives

Beyond the six core theoretical anchors in Section 2.2, several further traditions inform the interpretation of specific items. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory both bear on how a structured, needs-meeting institutional environment might shape persistence- and motivation-related items, with self-determination theory in particular distinguishing intrinsic from externally imposed

motivation in a way directly relevant to items describing staying motivated under setback. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stage theory situates adolescence as a period of identity formation that may be especially sensitive to institutional context, while Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory predicts that competencies such as cognitive and social skills are socially mediated through the surrounding activity system — a structured, cadet-pattern school being one such system, a conventional school another.

Leadership-specific theory further refines the predictions tested here. Trait-based accounts of leadership (Zaccaro, 2007) and integrative behavioural models (Yukl, 2012) both treat leadership capacity as emerging from the interaction of stable dispositions and situational demands, consistent with a selective rather than uniform schooling effect. Authentic leadership theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) and the broader leadership-development literature (Day, 2000) emphasise self-awareness and reflective practice as distinct from task-execution capacity, offering a further account of why reflective, forward-looking items (belief in achieving long-term goals) might not pattern the same way as task-facing items (persistence under setback). Finally, the experiential learning cycle developed by Kolb (1984), which refers to cycles of structured, repeated experiences with reflection on practice, would predict that, at least as much as the label "structured learning" itself as a variable, this type of learning cycle should be more important than some pedagogical approaches would. This study's ex post facto design does not distinguish these cycles as a separate factor from school type.

2.4 Indian Evidence and the Research Gap

Available evidence from the Indian context is largely institutional or descriptive, highlighting the discipline and physical training as means to shape the character of cadets of Sainik Schools, Military Schools, and the National Cadet corps (NCC) with very few studies comparing these cadets with non-cadet matched comparison samples using validated psychometric instruments. Generally when data can be compared, they are limited to a small sample size, from one school or institution, or qualitative or anecdotal reports from school administrators and not from students. The explicit mention of the integration of life-skills and socio-emotional competencies in mainstream schooling in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has raised the interest of whether the model of the military school is transferable, but there is a lack of a properly powered and multi-construct, item-level comparison with which to explore that question. This study directly addresses this gap – a sample of 450 students across two school types, six constructs, thirty individually tested items – one of the larger item-level comparisons of its kind, in an Indian secondary-school sample, with which we are aware.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Design and Sample

The design adopted was quantitative, cross-sectional and comparative (ex post facto) design because the variable of the school type is a naturally occurring variable and cannot be manipulated. A purposive/stratified sampling method was used to recruit students (450 in total) from Classes IX- XII of Military Schools (259 students, 57.6%) and Non-Military Schools (191 students, 42.4%) that represented both school type, class, and gender of students. The ages were in the 13- to 18-year range. The Military sample consisted almost entirely of males (249 people) and the Non-Military sample was almost entirely female (123 people); this gender difference was mentioned as a limitation below.

3.2 Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of 30 items, each item to measure six constructs: Self-Efficacy (SE), Resilience (RE), Emotional Intelligence (EI), Cognitive Competence (CC), Social Preference (SP), and Perceived Leadership Behaviour (LP) with five items each and they were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). A pilot study had reported acceptable-to-excellent internal consistency across all six constructs (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.60–0.91$).

3.3 Statistical Analysis

Independent-samples t-tests (with Levene's test for equality of variances, and Welch correction applied where variances differed significantly) compared Military and Non-Military means on each of the thirty items. Cohen's

d with 95% confidence intervals quantified effect size, and post-hoc statistical power was computed for every item. Chi-square tests examined association between item response category and gender, age band, and class; one-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests examined construct differences across age bands and class levels; Friedman's test examined the within-group rank ordering of the six composite constructs, separately for Military and Non-Military respondents; and Pearson correlation examined inter-construct relationships. All tests used $\alpha = .05$ (two-tailed).

4. Results

4.1 Summary of Group Differences

Of the thirty items tested, 10 (33%) showed a statistically significant Military versus Non-Military difference; the remaining twenty showed no significant difference. Table 1 summarises the significant items.

Table 1. Items showing a statistically significant Military vs. Non-Military difference (10 of 30 items; N = 450).

Item	Content	Mil. M	Non-Mil. M	p	d	Magnitude
SE1	Confidence in completing difficult tasks	4.03	3.69	< .001	0.35	small
SE3	Belief in achieving goals	3.97	4.27	0.001	-0.32	small
SE4	Staying motivated in setbacks	4.01	3.47	< .001	0.52	medium
RE5	Remain optimistic in difficult situations	4.08	3.66	< .001	0.47	small
EI1	Identify/manage own emotions	4.01	3.77	0.010	0.25	small
CC1	Critical thinking and problem-solving	4.00	3.71	0.001	0.33	small
CC2	Learning agility	3.99	4.17	0.025	-0.21	small
CC5	Innovation and new ideas	4.07	3.81	0.006	0.27	small
LP1	Inspire and motivate others	4.07	3.89	0.044	0.20	negligible
LP2	Decision-making and responsibility	4.14	3.74	< .001	0.41	small

4.2 Direction and Magnitude of Effects

Effect sizes among the significant items were predominantly small (|d| 0.24–0.47); one medium effect was observed (Self-Efficacy item 4, “Staying motivated in setbacks”, d = 0.52). No large effects ($|d| \geq 0.80$) were found on any of the thirty items. Military students scored significantly higher on items reflecting confidence under difficulty, persistence, optimism, managing one's own emotions, critical thinking, innovation, inspiring others,

and decision-making. Non-Military students scored significantly higher on two items: belief in achieving goals (Self-Efficacy) and learning agility (Cognitive Competence).

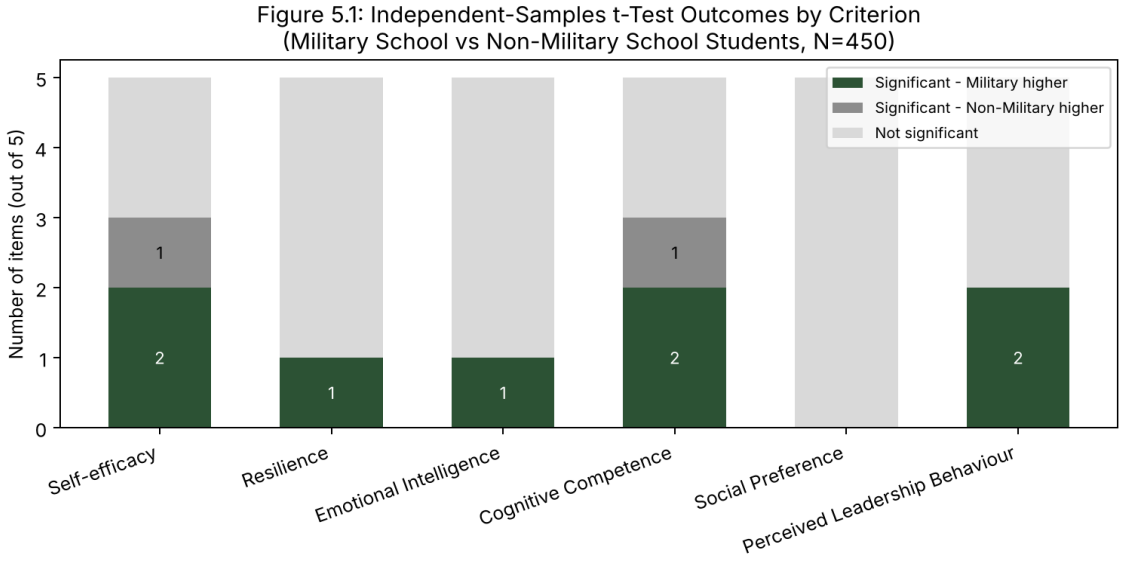


Figure 1. Independent-samples t-test outcomes by construct: number of items (out of five) favouring Military students, favouring Non-Military students, or not significant.

The construct-level breakdown in Figure 1 shows that the significant items are not evenly spread: Self-Efficacy and Cognitive Competence each contribute two Military-favouring and one Non-Military-favouring item, Perceived Leadership Behaviour contributes two Military-favouring items, Resilience and Emotional Intelligence each contribute one Military-favouring item, and Social Preference contributes none. This distribution is itself informative: it suggests that whatever mechanism underlies the Military-favouring pattern operates unevenly across constructs rather than uniformly, and that Social Preference arguably the construct most dependent on the specific peer context of a school, military or otherwise shows no detectable school-type effect at the item level at all.

4.3 Full Item-Level Results by Construct

For completeness and to support the item-level interpretive strategy of this paper, Table 2 reports independent-samples t-test results for all thirty items, organised by construct, including items that did not reach statistical significance.

Table 2. Independent-samples t-test results for all thirty items, by construct.

Item	Construct	Mil. M	Non-Mil. M	p	d	Decision
SE1	Self-efficacy	4.03	3.69	< .001	0.35	Sig.
SE2	Self-efficacy	4.13	4.18	0.470	-0.07	n.s.
SE3	Self-efficacy	3.97	4.27	0.001	-0.32	Sig.
SE4	Self-efficacy	4.01	3.47	< .001	0.52	Sig.
SE5	Self-efficacy	4.24	4.13	0.191	0.13	n.s.

Item	Construct	Mil. M	Non-Mil. M	p	d	Decision
RE1	Resilience	4.14	4.19	0.529	-0.06	n.s.
RE2	Resilience	3.98	3.87	0.235	0.11	n.s.
RE3	Resilience	4.16	4.25	0.302	-0.10	n.s.
RE4	Resilience	4.06	4.15	0.242	-0.11	n.s.
RE5	Resilience	4.08	3.66	< .001	0.47	Sig.
EI1	Emotional Intelligence	4.01	3.77	0.010	0.25	Sig.
EI2	Emotional Intelligence	4.03	4.17	0.153	-0.14	n.s.
EI3	Emotional Intelligence	3.95	4.11	0.091	-0.16	n.s.
EI4	Emotional Intelligence	4.02	4.02	0.979	0.00	n.s.
EI5	Emotional Intelligence	4.23	4.18	0.466	0.07	n.s.
CC1	Cognitive Competence	4.00	3.71	0.001	0.33	Sig.
CC2	Cognitive Competence	3.99	4.17	0.025	-0.21	Sig.
CC3	Cognitive Competence	4.15	4.16	0.972	-0.00	n.s.
CC4	Cognitive Competence	4.19	4.06	0.090	0.16	n.s.
CC5	Cognitive Competence	4.07	3.81	0.006	0.27	Sig.
SP1	Social Preference	4.04	3.98	0.486	0.07	n.s.
SP2	Social Preference	4.17	4.26	0.241	-0.11	n.s.
SP3	Social Preference	4.10	4.20	0.226	-0.12	n.s.
SP4	Social Preference	3.90	3.96	0.459	-0.07	n.s.
SP5	Social Preference	4.23	4.21	0.763	0.03	n.s.
LP1	Perceived Leadership Behaviour	4.07	3.89	0.044	0.20	Sig.
LP2	Perceived Leadership Behaviour	4.14	3.74	< .001	0.41	Sig.

Item	Construct	Mil. M	Non-Mil. M	p	d	Decision
LP3	Perceived Leadership Behaviour	3.99	4.09	0.266	-0.11	n.s.
LP4	Perceived Leadership Behaviour	4.03	3.96	0.353	0.09	n.s.
LP5	Perceived Leadership Behaviour	4.05	4.12	0.403	-0.08	n.s.

4.4 Composite Construct-Level Parity

Table 3. Composite construct-level mean comparison and Military-to-Non-Military ratio

Construct	Military Mean	Non-Military Mean	Ratio
Self-efficacy	4.07	3.95	1.03
Resilience	4.08	4.02	1.01
Emotional Intelligence	4.05	4.05	1.00
Cognitive Competence	4.08	3.98	1.02
Social Preference	4.09	4.12	0.99
Perceived Leadership Behaviour	4.06	3.96	1.02

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At the composite (construct) level, all six ratios fall between 0.99 and 1.03 a near-parity pattern that masks the item-level mixed-direction findings reported above. This divergence between composite-level parity and item-level difference is addressed further in the Discussion.

4.5 Demographic Association (Chi-Square)

Chi-square tests of association between individual item response category and each of three demographic variables — gender, age band, and class — were computed for all thirty items (ninety tests in total). Table 4 summarises how many items showed a statistically significant association with each demographic variable.

Table 4. Count of items showing a statistically significant chi-square association with each demographic variable.

Demographic variable	Items with significant association (of 30)	Share
Gender	8	27%
Age band	2	7%
Class	4	13%

Significant associations were concentrated more in gender than in age or class, consistent with the pronounced gender imbalance between the two school-type groups (see Section 3.1) and reinforcing the need to treat gender as a potential confound rather than an independent demographic factor in this sample. One-way ANOVA found no statistically significant construct-level difference across the five age bands examined (all $p > .05$). Post-hoc power analysis indicated the design could reliably detect effect sizes of $d \approx 0.27$ or larger at 80% power; several non-significant items (e.g., Cognitive Competence item 3, d near zero) carried power below 0.10, meaning small true effects could exist but go undetected at this sample size.

4.6 Within-Group Construct Ranking (Friedman Test)

Friedman's test examined whether the six composite construct scores were ranked consistently within each group, rather than being interchangeable. Among Military students, the six constructs' mean ranks were statistically indistinguishable ($\chi^2(5) = 1.469$, $p = 0.917$), indicating no construct is reliably rated higher or lower than another within this group. Among Non-Military students, by contrast, the ranking was highly significant ($\chi^2(5) = 21.325$, $p = < .001$), with Social Preference (mean rank 3.97) rated clearly highest and Perceived Leadership Behaviour and Self-efficacy rated lowest (mean ranks 3.26 and 3.26 respectively).

Table 5. Friedman mean ranks of the six composite constructs, by school type.

Construct	Military mean rank	Non-Military mean rank
Self-efficacy	3.49	3.26
Resilience	3.56	3.53
Emotional Intelligence	3.42	3.60
Cognitive Competence	3.57	3.38
Social Preference	3.53	3.97
Perceived Leadership Behaviour	3.45	3.26

This divergence is, to our knowledge, not previously reported in the Indian military-versus-non-military schooling literature, and it offers a complementary line of evidence to the item-level t-test findings: Non-Military students appear to hold a more differentiated internal hierarchy among these six constructs, rating Social Preference distinctly above the others, while Military students rate all six constructs as roughly equally salient to their self-concept. A possible explanation, expanded on in the Discussion, is that having a structure and an environment like a military service could diminish the meaning of the six domains as separate and distinct from each other, while a less structured environment may give rise to a more differentiated self-evaluation.

5. Discussion

There was no clear evidence of a cross the pattern leadership advantage for military pattern schooling. For Military students, their strengths are in action-oriented, task facing behaviors: persistence when things go wrong, optimism, taking action and inspiring others. For Non-Military students, the advantage that is seen is focused on reflective or adaptive judgement (belief in achievement of goals and learning agility). This is in line with a reasonable, but not causal explanation: a task-repetition structured environment may develop action-oriented skills, and a less structured environment may develop other reflective and adaptive skills. That the composite-level parity (ratios of 0.99-1.03) is greater than the item-level divergence (ten significant items in mixed directions) is an important methodological finding in and of itself. The composite scores are the average of the items, and can hide actual

and opposing effects at the item level. This suggests that it is necessary to have item level reporting in comparative educational psychology studies like this, rather than only using the composite construct scores.

5.1 Interpreting the Construct-Specific Pattern

In terms of the theoretical predictions outlined in Section 2.2, the overall pattern of results is similar to that predicted by a mastery-experience explanation of the Military-favouring items. Bandura's (1997) framework implies that repeated structured, graded challenge would lead to an increased sense of self-efficacy in that domain of the challenge; two of the important items in the Self-Efficacy scale showed a preference for the Military students (confidence under difficulty, staying motivated in setbacks), both of which refer to performance under imposed, structured pressure, whereas the Non-Military-favouring item (belief in achieving long-term personal goals) is more of a judgement in the future and less connected to any one kind of structured experience. As with Cognitive Competence, a parallel analysis holds for the Military items, on the one hand, and the Non-Military items, on the other: The Military items relate to critical thinking and innovation in the face of constraints, while the Non-Military items relate to general learning agility.

The flat, statistically indistinguishable rank pattern observed is an additional level: If a structured, military-pattern environment presents all six domains as more or less equal subdomains of a single disciplinary ethos, it may be justifiable for the Military students' lack of resolution between the domains, as was reported by the Friedman-test divergence in section 4.6. Students who do not attend a military school tend to have more diverse experiences to evaluate each construct, and hence, a stronger differentiation of constructs as evident, with Social Preference most prominent. This is an exploratory (not confirmatory) interpretation, in agreement with both the above item-level and Friedman test results. The small-to-moderate effect sizes overall reported here (|d| 0.24–0.52) are also consistent with what have been reported on JROTC and Combined Cadet Force evaluations internationally, which also report small-to-moderate, construct-specific effects, and not large uniform gains, lending confidence that the pattern reported here is an identifiable feature of structured cadet-pattern schooling.

The single significant positive item on Resilience for Military students (Optimism in the face of difficulty) is consistent with resilience research that states that problem focused coping can be fostered in a protected, structured environment, but not necessarily in a generalised, broad sense of resilience (Rutter, 1987; Masten, 2001) which would predict exactly the pattern observed here, with four of five items on Resilience showing no significant difference between the groups. In general, these relatively small effects suggest that the psychological benefits of this particular structured intervention are unlikely to be the same across the various components of psychological well-being (as well-being researchers have warned, see Diener (1984), Seligman (2011)).

5.2 Implications for Practice and Policy

The results have direct linkages to the implementation of NEP 2020. The specific, evidence-based competencies identified here (motivation-under-setback, for example, in Non-Military school curricula; and reflective, learner-directed goal-setting activities in Military school curricula) would be more effective for promoting the competencies of leadership than would a wholesale transfer of the military model of schooling. The demographic-association results (Section 4.5) further suggest that any such intervention should be piloted and evaluated separately by gender, given that gender carried the largest share of significant item-level associations among the three demographic variables examined, and that the two samples differ sharply in gender composition.

5.3 Future Research

- A longitudinal or quasi-experimental design would allow stronger causal inference than the cross-sectional design used here.
- A gender-stratified replication would separate the school-type effect from the gender confound identified in Section 4.5.
- Because the companion paper (Paper 2) reports that this instrument's composite-level reliability did not replicate at main-study scale, any future use of this instrument should be preceded by confirmatory factor analysis and item revision.

5.4 Limitations

- Cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; observed differences may reflect self-selection into military schooling rather than a schooling effect.
- Gender imbalance between groups (96% male in the Military sample vs. 64% female in the Non-Military sample) is a potential confound, reinforced by the gender-concentrated chi-square findings in Section 4.5.
- Self-report Likert measurement carries inherent social-desirability risk, particularly in a disciplined institutional setting.
- A companion paper (Paper 2) reports markedly lower internal consistency than at pilot, which argues for interpreting composite scores, though not the item-level findings reported here, with caution.

6. Conclusion

This study offers item-level, large-sample data supporting the conclusion that the military-pattern school is related to an advantage in some, but not all, positive leadership-relevant psychological traits. Ten out of the 30 items (33%) had large differences between the 259 Military and 191 Non-Military students, with the majority having small effect sizes and being clustered in the behaviours related to action, and composite-level scores for each of the six constructs were very close (ratios of 0.99–1.03). A within-group analysis showed that for Non-Military students there was a significant difference between perceived importance of the six constructs (Friedman $\chi^2(5) = 21.325$, $p = < .001$) with no significant differences for Military students ($\chi^2(5) = 1.469$, $p = 0.917$), suggesting a possible flattening effect of structured schooling on self-assessed priorities. As a whole, the results do not support the general institutional belief that there is a leadership benefit in sending students to military versus civilian schools; indeed, they suggest that this is not the case, and that a specific policy solution should be based on evidence-driven curricular modifications, rather than a blanket switch to either form of schooling..

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