



RESEARCH PAPER

The Influence of School Leaderships' Trust on Teachers' Morale and Professional Development: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the relationship between the school leadership trust on morale and the professional development of teachers. A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 teachers from 32 primary schools under FGEI(C/G) in Rawalpindi city. Further, in order to gather qualitative data for this research, a semi structure interview guide was used. This format allowed each participant the opportunity to provide their own unique perspective based upon their personal experiences in their individual school environments. Thematic analysis was used to interpret common themes with in the collected data. The research found that school leadership positively affects teacher morale and professionalism and that trust in school administrators acts as a mediating variable in this relationship. The results of this research support the notion that trust can be an effective mechanism in increasing professional behavior in teachers and that school administrators should take steps to establish a culture of trust between teachers and school administrators.

Keywords: School Leadership, Trust, Teacher Professionalism, Educational Administration

Introduction

Teachers are important agents in improving educational outcomes within educational settings. Therefore, institutions should foster an environment that supports teacher effectiveness. Various factors influence teachers' morale, motivation, and overall performance—one of the most significant being the level of trust placed in them by school leaders or administrators (Fard & Karimi, 2015). Consequently, educational organizations continually seek strategies to enhance teacher engagement and participation in achieving the institution's goals and objectives.

Building and maintaining effective organizational relationships require both administrators and staff to recognize the importance of trust, progress, and their collective role in sustaining institutional integrity. Organizational trust is increasingly viewed as a fundamental element of institutional success, social cohesion, and democratic functioning. In contemporary contexts, trust has emerged as a crucial construct across various leadership and management frameworks (Nord et al., 2014).

Trust is perceived as an individualized belief held by individuals toward the capability, integrity and benevolence of other persons or organizations; it can be expressed in both the institutional and relational contexts. (Joo, Yoon, & Galbraith, 2022).

Organizational trust is a critical determinant of institutional success and is characterized by the competence, performance, and problem-solving capacity demonstrated within an organization, even under less supportive conditions. The level of trust within an organization, along with related factors such as employee commitment, job satisfaction, and the strength of interpersonal relationships, contributes significantly to the organization's overall efficiency and effectiveness (Mohamed et al., 2012).

Literature Review

Trust in Administrators

Trust is commonly referred to as one of the most basic aspects of organizational behavior, and is often seen as a defining characteristic of both academically successful schools and those that function effectively. Since it is such a multi-dimensional concept, it incorporates cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions. Baier (1986) describes trust as "relying on the ability and intentions of others to protect the things you care about, as opposed to harming them," when you entrust them with such things. In the same manner, Tschannen-Moran (2014) explains trust as "willingness to expose yourself to another person believing your interests or that which you value will not be in danger."

Therefore, as far as educational settings go, these definitions suggest that a school leader who demonstrates trustworthiness would support and respect a teacher's expression of vulnerability to create a safe psychological climate for the school community. On the other hand, school administrators can reciprocate this type of trust through demonstration of openness, predictability, and a willingness to share responsibility. Therefore, trust is best described as a complex system of beliefs based on confidence that a particular individual will act with dependability, fairness, transparency, competence, and benevolence toward another.

Teacher's perceptions of trust in their school administrators, play a significant role in the success of schools' efforts to achieve goals associated with student learning, and institutional improvements. Through the lens of the emotional path model, trust is considered to be a critical component of a teacher's beliefs and expectations toward their principal, fellow colleagues, students, and parents. Additionally, trust is viewed as a mutual and dynamic construct, which facilitates effective leadership, enhances collaboration, and reinforces the resiliency of organizations. Research has identified a direct correlation between the level of trust present in schools, and the achievement of students. Schools with high levels of trust have been found to have greater teacher commitment, greater professional development opportunities for teachers, and greater school morale than schools with low levels of trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Further, trust does not only serve as a mechanism for improving schools, but is also viewed as a catalyst for creating systemic change in educational organizations (Louis, 2007).

When we look at this way, administrator's trust of administrators is an important part of how democratic leadership can help increase teacher professionalism and morale. With a consistent and reliable system of respect and transparency from school leaders, teachers will be more likely to take advantage of opportunities for reflective teaching, professional development, and to work together for continued growth for the entire organization. Trust, whether it is between teachers or between teachers and administrators, is an essential element in order to make the most out of what school leadership has to offer. The relationship between teachers and school administrators is built on each party trusting that the other is acting in the best interest of the students (for teachers) and that the other party is working toward improving the school for administrators.

Leaders who cultivate relationship based on trust establish a professional setting that motivates teachers to engage in continuous erudition, refine their instructional skills, and collaborate toward achieving advanced levels of performance and student success (Forsyth & Adams, 2014, p. 95; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran, 2009). By fostering a trustworthy and supportive school climate, administrators encourage teachers to take professional risks—such as experimenting with new instructional strategies or initiating innovative school improvement projects (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Principals need to be able to give each teacher or group of teachers personalized assistance, exhibit those behaviors they want others to exhibit, and create a set of high expectations that are attainable for their teachers to achieve these outcomes (Ross & Gray, 2006). Principals can also enhance the quality of education by creating an environment where all stakeholders feel confident about the learning processes happening in school through consistent, open and honest communication with teachers and other school employees.

A lack of trust by teachers in school leadership has been shown to lead to an attitude that the school leader is acting with a hidden agenda and therefore is not on the "same page" as the rest of the school community (Yilmaz, 2005).

When the school leader establishes trusting relationships through genuine personal interaction and positive communication with employees, they establish a high level of confidence and commitment from those employees, which is a critical component of both the employee's ability to support and sustain professional development, as well as the overall success of the organization.

By supporting families and allowing employees to take care of family needs, Spitzer (2000) noted that school leaders can foster the creativity, motivation and sense of empowerment needed to enhance employee enthusiasm to be present during times of crisis; in addition, through the establishment of friendships and relationships among employees, school leaders are able to reduce the fear, hostility and tension that may exist within the organization, ultimately leading to the trust and cooperation necessary to provide the flexibility and collaborative environment required for innovation and growth (p. 192).

However, Trust may be either built or destroyed by Individual Attitudes/Actions. When employees see their leaders as Trustworthy, it is reasonable to believe that employees will commit their time and skills to support the advancement of institutional goals. When there is a feeling of Belonging, employees are willing to make greater efforts in their work. When Trust exists at high levels, it creates a greater sense of personal responsibility and a greater ability for each employee to understand how their role fits into a larger picture and how their efforts contribute to common goals. performance (The Ken Blanchard Companies, 2010)

Leadership creates an environment of trust in which employees will consistently go above and beyond the call of duty, both formally and informally; and in this same way, consistently building on the foundation of a high trust environment leads to increased teamwork and significant improvements in overall organizational performance (The Ken Blanchard Companies, 2010)

Therefore, establishing a relationship based on trust is critical for successful leadership. Without it, employee compliance to directives, work ethic, and belief in their leader's commitment and reliability are less likely (Dyke, 2013). In addition, trust represents a very important part of relational power and is one of the most powerful influences within an organization (Hower, 2005). Trust creates a positive and empowering work environment, resulting in greater productivity and efficiency. Trust also creates a competitive advantage through better communication, improved mutual understanding, reduced stress and the creation of reciprocal trust (Bibb & Kourdi, 2004).

However, building trust is a slow and purposeful process. In particular, teachers must believe that their school leaders' trust in them to teach well, to communicate appropriately with parents, and to do their job in an honest and ethical manner (Littleford, 2007).

Trust and Morale

Trust has been developed in this school through the establishment of an open and collaborative process of decision-making and through the creation of a positive work culture. As a result of working in a supportive, structured and resourceful environment, teachers develop high morale in their colleagues and in their administrators which creates the foundation for more productive collaborative efforts as well as better communication and a shared sense of purpose regarding the goals of the institution. The existence of a trusting relationship also increases the opportunity for professional growth and collective accountability for student success. In addition, the presence of such an environment contributes to both higher levels of job satisfaction among teachers and to the overall betterment of the quality of education at the school (Valcarcel, 2025).

Association Between Trust in leadership and Teacher Professional Attitude

School leadership have the ability to create a positive school environment through their collaborative work with staff, providing staff with opportunities for continued education and training, and evaluating and continuing to develop the skills of each educator. Research has demonstrated the interconnection of trust and teacher professionalism as defining characteristics of successful schools (Koşar, 2015; Dean, 2011).

School leadership can build the confidence of educators and help them continue to grow professionally when they allow and assist educators in taking risks and trying new things. Educators will be more likely to use new ideas and methods and adapt to the ever-changing educational world if they feel safe from reprisal, instead of strictly following pre-established policies and procedures (Clove & Goldsmith, 2002; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Louis & Kruse, 1995). In this type of trusting environment, educators are able to use their own professional judgment and develop their own creative ways to teach, which builds their overall feeling of being a professional educator.

Additionally, the level of emotional involvement that teachers have with their job is also supported by the many aspects of trust — such as compassion, trustworthiness, honesty, competence, faith and openness — which all contribute to the establishment of an organizationally trustworthy working environment (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). While theory supports the relationship between trust in administrators and teacher professionalization, there is still little research investigating the relationship directly — therefore, it is critical to continue examining this topic.

Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical base for the study rests on organizational learning theory, which provides a framework for developing programs for professional development to meet the changing needs of teachers through the different career stages. (Morrison, 2002, p. 17, p. 111). Motivational theory was used in conjunction with organizational learning theory to provide a broader view of what influences teacher behavior and performance, including relational aspects of the work environment.

Prior studies have investigated emotional and relational aspects of educational settings such as trust, and teacher professionalism from the perspective of an emotional pathway model (Leithwood, 2012, p. 47; Leithwood et al., 2019), which posits that if school leaders foster a constructive school environment based on a high level of trust in the school community, it will lead to increased levels of motivation among teachers to continually grow and improve their instructional practice.

The emotional pathway provides an overview of the fundamental motivators that support successful schools; it emphasizes how the teacher's emotional state and their disposition towards their job and the job of teaching influences the overall climate of the school. In addition to these dimensions, there are four other important factors that affect a school leader's effectiveness; they include: (1) developing guideline for the school, (2) developing people or staff, (3) building a strong organizational structure, and (4) improving the instructional program. The emotional pathway supports each of these dimensions through the development of trust in school leadership and the professionalization of teachers. This also reinforces the rational, administrative, and family dimensions of school functioning. (Leithwood and colleagues, 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2017, p. 1)

In addition, research indicates that the emotional pathway has a large but indirect effect on numerous individuals in the school environment including students, teachers, and administrators (Robinson et al., 2008, Hallinger & Heck, 1998, Leithwood & Louis, 2012 p. 19, 34) which supports the idea that trust and emotional wellness will help build an efficient collaborative and high performing school.

Problem Statement and Research Objectives

The primary goal of this qualitative research project was to evaluate the connection between teachers' perceptions of trust in their school leader, and their teacher morale, as well as the influence that this connection would have on their professional development. This study also attempted to find out what are the main factors which affect a teacher's morale; and, how do those factors effect one another within a school setting. The third aim of this research was to identify if teachers perceive trust as an attribute of themselves (an individual) or as a process/way that is occurring within an organization (the school), and if the way they perceive trust is a factor in influencing both their professional growth and their general morale.

The results of the current study have significant implications for the practice of both teaching and administration. These insights can be used to promote a more supportive and collaborative environment within schools; thereby supporting teachers' professional growth through the intended promotion of trust in their leaders. Teachers' beliefs about how much they trust their administrators directly impacts their ability to support administrative efforts toward institutional goals of increasing students' achievement and improving the overall performance of the school.

Trust works to operate as a fundamental belief or expectation on behalf of principals, peers, students, and parents. The trust that exists is both reciprocal and dynamic; it develops through interaction and common experience. In order for effective leaders to create collaborative working environments, reinforce their professionals' commitment to teaching, and increase their schools' ability to withstand changes, they will need to recognize and intentionally build the role of trust in leadership to enhance teacher's morale, create a work environment with high job satisfaction and motivate them to continue growing professionally.

Material and Methods

Population and Sample

All the primary school teachers under Federal Government Educational Institutions Cantt and Garrisons FGEI (C/G) in Rawalpindi city were the population of this study. Twenty female primary school teachers were selected for interview purpose via convenience

sampling method. Each participant received a pseudonym to protect their identity and adhere to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

Qualitative data were collected for the purposes of investigating the theoretical concepts of trust and morale through the use of a structured, semi-standardized interview guide developed by Littleford (2007) that had been used previously. The interview guide had been developed following an extensive review of the literature concerning school leadership styles and empirical studies focusing on variations in teacher morale. In addition to having over thirty years of teaching experience, the developer of the interview guide was able to provide a degree of contextual relevance and conceptual depth to the structure of the interview.

Methods and Procedures

The present study is based upon a qualitative research methodology to assess the relationship between school leadership' trust, teachers' morale and professional development in schools in Pakistan. A qualitative research methodology has been applied because it enables a deep and in-depth assessment of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of social phenomena occurring in a real life setting.

A qualitative research methodology was also chosen to gain a deeper insight into how the trust of school leaders influences the morale and professional development of teachers. This methodology will allow the study to examine and understand the complex interpersonal relations and the dynamics of organizations which are not fully understood by quantitative methodologies alone.

School teachers who were involved in this study were recruited via purposive sampling. Purposive sampling has been used to ensure that participants have experienced working with a school principal and therefore have first-hand knowledge of the issues relating to trust and morale within a school environment.

Qualitative research techniques were used to collect the data including semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These types of methodologies allowed participants to freely articulate their views, experiences and feelings concerning workplace trust and its influence on their morale. Open-ended questions were asked to encourage participants to respond in detail and to capture the fullness of participants' lived experiences.

Thematic analysis has been used to analyze the collected data during the research. Transcripts of participant interviews were examined in detail and coded to identify any recurring patterns or themes related to principals' trust and teachers' morale. This systematic process allowed the researcher to understand the data and key issues raised in participants' accounts. In this study, the researchers have ensured that the ethical principles were followed throughout the process. The participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study and told that participation was voluntary. Additionally, the participants' identities were protected by not revealing them in any form. Data collected from participants was kept confidential and anonymous; all identifying information will be removed and participants will be reassured that their data will be used solely for academic purposes.

Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis is an advanced qualitative research technique that allows for a detailed exploration of your data and the identification of repeated patterns and themes.

The thematic analysis included a sequential and repetitive process of coding and categorizing the textual information derived from conducted interviews with teachers.

In very first stage of thematic analysis, the researcher had to become familiarized with the data through a meticulous reading and re-reading of the teacher interview transcripts to have a full comprehension of the data of the transcripts. At this time, the researcher generated the initial codes which identified meaningful parts of the data related to various concepts, feelings, experiences and challenges that the teachers expressed.

Next, the researcher identified relationships between the initial codes and categorized them as possible themes. These themes were developed through the researchers' assessment of the patterns and variations throughout the entire data set. In conducting the thematic analysis, the researchers used strict criteria to validate the results.

Trust

Based on the data from the interviews The current research identified "trust" as the primary and most influential theme. This theme emphasizes the importance of trust in understanding how teachers' morale may be influenced by school leadership. School leaders are responsible for creating a place where teachers feel they are trusted and respected, which directly influences whether or not they can do their job effectively. Additionally, when teachers have the opportunity to communicate with each other while feeling trusted, it allows them to complete tasks more efficiently (Littleford, 2007).

Many of the interviewees stated that establishing trust with head teachers has greatly contributed to their self-confidence and morale, and therefore provides a sense of belonging and security. Several interviewee's discussed their positive relationships with their head teachers, describing them as empathetic, supportive, and caring toward their professional needs.

For example, one member reported:

The participants alluded to an ongoing relationship of mutual support and trust between their head teacher and themselves; when they required assistance for anything, their head teacher was there to provide guidance and support them in meeting their needs. One example of such a relationship is as follows:

"Any time I needed help or support of some kind, the head teacher was always available to assist and direct me. When I requested permission to take a day off of work due to my sick child, the head teacher assured me that my school responsibilities would be met while I was away."(Alina)

A second participant had a similar experience as the previous participant:

"The head teacher has always been very accepting of me bringing my infant to school; therefore, I am able to balance my professional obligations with my maternal responsibilities".(Rania)

According to Blase and Blase (1994), a head teacher can create a climate of trust by encouraging honesty, developing open lines of communication, and modeling behavior that will create a positive climate of trust (p. 20). As indicated by Blase and Blase, one participant also identified the significance of a leadership's trustworthiness fostering a relationship between the head teacher and teachers:

“At no time have I experienced any lack of trust between myself and other colleagues or between myself and the head teacher. I was somewhat hesitant to begin, however, my head teacher provided me with complete support, thereby enabling me to overcome the initial challenges that I encountered.”(Amna)

As previously mentioned, one of the participants who was new to the profession identified how the trust from the head teacher contributed to her morale and professional development as she began her teaching career:

“When I graduated, I was a new teacher with no prior teaching experience. At first, I was quite apprehensive about being successful. However, my head teacher showed me complete trust and allowed me to develop professionally through trial and error. Her trust gave me the motivation to improve my skills and increase my confidence in my ability to teach.”

In summary, participants repeatedly noted that a supportive and understanding head teacher can greatly contribute to a teacher's morale and effectiveness as a teacher. The examples shown above illustrate the significant role of trust in establishing a positive relationship between educators and head teachers. Collectively, these findings suggest that trust is a critical component to not only motivate and increase morale of teachers, but to also promote the professional growth of teachers and foster unity within organizations.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between school leadership trust and elementary school teacher morale. School leadership trust was found to be significantly related to teacher morale. The study highlights the impact of school leadership trust on teacher professionalism in educational settings. Trust has been identified as a critical mediator variable (or mechanism) that connects school leadership with teacher professional behaviors. When school administrators are perceived as honest, transparent and genuinely concerned about teacher's professional growth and development, they create an environment that fosters collaborative work, innovation and mutual respect among colleagues. In addition to enhancing teacher confidence and morale, this type of climate will increase teacher commitment to students, student achievement and institutional goals.

Furthermore, the study indicates that school leaders who establish and maintain trust with teachers do so by providing fair decision making processes, establishing open lines of communication, providing relevant professional development opportunities and being responsive to teachers needs. A climate of support and trust empowers teachers to take initiative, reflect on their practice, strive for continued growth and improvement and ultimately, provide better services to students. As a result, schools that foster a climate of trust have stronger working relationships among faculty, increased professional accountability and better academic performance.

Trust in school administration is shown to be both a basis and catalyst for teacher professionalism. Therefore, building trust with faculty should be a primary focus of educational leaders, and become an integral component of all policy, interaction, and professional development initiatives. Further research may examine the longitudinal effects of trust on teacher retention, instructional quality and overall school effectiveness. Additionally, future research may help to identify the types of changes that occur when educators lead in a manner that utilizes trust as the basis for their actions and decisions.

Recommendations

Based on the results and discussions of this study, several suggestions have been offered for improving the performance of school leaders and encouraging professional teacher practices by increasing trust among teachers and their administrators.

- **Develop a Trust-Based Culture:** School leaders must foster a culture of transparency in all forms of communication, and consistently follow through on their decisions to establish credibility with teachers, and make them feel supported and respected in their professional roles.
- **Leverage Collaborative Leadership:** In order for school administrators to effectively collaborate with their faculty members, they must include them in the process of creating policies, designing curricula, and participating in school-wide improvement efforts. This collaborative effort will enhance teachers' feelings of accountability and commitment to the profession as a whole.
- **Support Teacher Professional Growth and Development:** The continuous professional development opportunities for teachers must be developed and implemented in such a way as to reflect the changing needs of teachers. The professional development opportunities offered by administrators must also be relevant, supportive, and consistent with the goals of the institution and with the career goals of the teacher.
- **Emotional and Social Support:** Educating school leaders about the importance of supporting the emotional needs of their faculty, while providing them with the tools and resources necessary to support those needs, can greatly impact the levels of workplace stress experienced by teachers, while enhancing their morale and motivation.
- **Lead with Integrity and Respect:** School leaders must model integrity, fairness, and respect in all of their interactions, in order to set the example for their teachers to do the same in their own classroom practices.
- **Effective Communication:** Establishing effective channels of communication amid school leadership and educators is essential. Teachers need regular and constructive feedback from school leadership, and the possibility to participate in meaningful dialogue regarding the contributions they have made to the school community. This will enhance the level of trust between school leadership and teachers, and develop positive and productive working relationships.
- **Risk Taking and Innovative Practices:** School leaders must develop an environment that supports risk-taking by teachers, who will be encouraged to try new approaches to teaching and to share their innovative ideas, without fear of criticism. Developing this type of environment will enhance the creativity, adaptability, and confidence of teachers in their ability to teach.

Creating trusting relationships between teachers and school leadership has significant potential to improve the professionalism of teachers and ultimately, improve the educational success of students. As such, educational policymakers and educators preparing future leaders should focus on building trusting relationships, increasing emotional intelligence, and developing collaborative leadership skills in the preparation and development of school leaders.

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