ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN ENHANCING INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE: EXPLORING HEADTEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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Abstract
Objectives: *This study investigates the role of school leadership in enhancing institutional performance by exploring the experiences and practices of headteachers in government secondary schools across Punjab, Pakistan. The researchers have focused on transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership theories.*
Methods: *An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design has been adopted to analyze that how these leadership models influence school performance indicators, including student achievement, teacher attendance, retention rates, and community involvement. Quantitative data were collected from a stratified random sample of 300 headteachers using validated instruments. However, qualitative insights were gained through in-depth interviews with 12 purposively selected participants.* ***Findings:*** *Results of the study revealed moderately high implementation of leadership practices, with distributed leadership emerging as the most influential predictor of institutional performance ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$). Pearson correlations showed significant relationships between all leadership styles and performance, while hierarchical regression and mediation analysis confirmed that distributed leadership partially mediated the effect of transformational leadership on performance. Qualitative findings further contextualized the quantitative results, revealing adaptive strategies such as community engagement, resource mobilization, and shared decision-making in response to bureaucratic and infrastructural constraints.*
Conclusion: *The study concludes that effective school leadership particularly when grounded in distributed practices plays a pivotal role in enhancing institutional outcomes in low-resource contexts like Punjab. These findings offer significant implications for educational policy, leadership training, and school improvement planning.*
Implications: *The research advocates for embedding distributed leadership competencies in professional development programs and aligning school leadership evaluations with data-informed and collaborative practices. Limitations and avenues for future research are discussed, including the need for longitudinal and multi-stakeholder studies to establish causal links and further validate the proposed leadership-performance framework.*

Keywords: *Role; Leadership; Institutional Performance; Headteachers; Experiences; Punjab*

1. Introduction

The significance of effective school leadership in driving institutional performance has become an established discourse in educational research globally. The role of headteachers, or school principals, has transitioned from a purely administrative function to one requiring

visionary leadership, strategic decision-making, and instructional guidance. The global consensus, supported by meta-analyses (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Hallinger & Heck, 1998), suggests that school leadership especially transformational and instructional leadership has a substantial influence on school performance, albeit indirectly, by shaping the school climate, motivating teachers, and establishing a culture of continuous improvement.

In developing countries such as Pakistan, the link between school leadership and institutional performance is increasingly gaining attention due to the challenges posed by rapid population growth, scarce resources, and the demand for quality education. Punjab, being the largest and most populous province of Pakistan, houses over 50,000 public schools and nearly 350,000 teachers. It has become a central focus of educational reforms implemented through projects like the Punjab Education Sector Reform Programme (PESRP) and the Punjab Education Sector Plan (2019–2024). However, despite these reforms and an emphasis on accountability, headteachers often function in complex environments with limited autonomy and capacity (Punjab School Education Department, 2019).

In recent years, initiatives such as the Punjab Education and English Language Initiative (PEELI) and the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) framework have been implemented to build the leadership capacity of headteachers. However, there is insufficient empirical evidence to demonstrate whether these capacity-building efforts are translating into measurable improvements in institutional performance indicators such as student achievement, retention, teacher attendance, and community involvement. The role of leadership in this context is particularly important because headteachers serve as key change agents who interpret, adapt, and implement education policies at the school level.

There is also a growing emphasis on distributed leadership models, where leadership responsibilities are shared among school staff. Research suggests that distributed leadership can foster greater teacher commitment, collegiality, and shared accountability (Harris, 2008). However, the extent to which these practices are being adopted in the public schools of Punjab and their impact on school performance remains largely unexplored.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although leadership development is a priority in Punjab's education strategy, empirical research on how headteachers' leadership practices affect institutional performance is still limited and fragmented. Most studies focus on perceptions or single leadership models without linking them to objective performance metrics. Moreover, little is known about how headteachers in Punjab navigate contextual challenges such as lack of resources, teacher absenteeism, bureaucratic interference, and political pressure. Therefore, a comprehensive investigation into headteachers' leadership styles, adaptive strategies, and their relationship with institutional outcomes is essential for informed policy and practice.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

Objectives of the present research study are as follows:

- To explore the prevailing leadership styles and practices among government secondary school headteachers in Punjab.
- To examine the relationship between leadership practices and institutional performance indicators.
- To investigate the challenges faced by headteachers in executing leadership responsibilities.
- To identify adaptive leadership strategies employed by headteachers to improve school performance.

1.3 Research Questions

The present research study has focused on following research questions:

- What leadership styles are most commonly practiced by headteachers in Punjab?
- How do these leadership styles correlate with institutional performance indicators?
- What is the primary challenges head teachers encounter in their leadership roles?
- What adaptive strategies are used by headteachers to overcome these challenges?

1.4 Hypotheses

Hypotheses of the present research study are as follows:

H1: Transformational leadership practices have a positive and significant relationship with institutional performance.

H2: Instructional leadership practices are positively associated with improved student academic achievement.

H3: Distributed leadership mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and institutional performance.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research will contribute to the body of knowledge on educational leadership by extending established leadership theories particularly transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership to the context of a developing country. It will provide insights into how these leadership paradigms interact in a low-resource, high-demand environment. By highlighting the specific leadership practices that correlate with improved institutional performance, the study will inform leadership training programs such as PEELI and CPD. It will provide a framework for headteacher evaluation and school improvement planning. The study will generate evidence-based recommendations for policymakers in the Punjab School Education Department. It will support the design of future education policies by identifying the leadership competencies and support systems that are most effective in enhancing institutional performance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is widely recognized for its ability to bring about change and motivate stakeholders towards a shared vision. Leithwood et al. (2006) define transformational leadership in schools as the ability of headteachers to inspire, intellectually stimulate, and provide individualized support to teachers and students. This leadership style focuses on vision-building, setting high expectations, and fostering a school culture that values learning and innovation. Transformational leadership has been shown to impact teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and ultimately student performance (Nguni, Sleegers, & Denessen, 2006).

2.1.2 Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership centers around improving teaching and learning. It involves setting clear academic goals, supervising instruction, evaluating teaching quality, and ensuring professional development. Hallinger and Heck (1998) argue that instructional leadership, when consistently practiced, leads to improved academic outcomes through focused attention on curriculum, assessment, and pedagogical support. In the context of Punjab, this approach is particularly relevant, given the need to improve learning outcomes and address learning poverty.

2.1.3 Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership emphasizes the collective engagement of staff members in leadership functions. According to Harris (2008), distributed leadership promotes shared accountability, teacher collaboration, and empowerment. In schools with resource constraints, distributed leadership can serve as a mechanism for leveraging staff expertise and enhancing organizational capacity. Aziz (2022) found that schools in Lahore where leadership was distributed had more engaged staff and a positive organizational climate.

2.2 International Empirical Studies

Research in developed countries has consistently linked school leadership to student outcomes. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) conducted a meta-analysis and concluded that leadership focused on teaching and learning had the greatest impact on student achievement. In the UK, the National College for School Leadership (Leithwood et al., 2006) identified seven strong claims about school leadership, highlighting that leadership is second only to classroom instruction in affecting student learning. In sub-Saharan Africa, Bush et al. (2010) reported that headteachers who engaged in transformational and instructional leadership practices significantly improved student achievement despite systemic challenges. Similarly, Alzoraiki et al. (2024) in Yemen found that transformational leadership was positively associated with school performance, and school culture acted as a mediator.

2.3 Research in Pakistan and Punjab

In Pakistan, several studies have explored school leadership, although most are qualitative or descriptive. Arshad, Hussain, and Iqbal (2024) examined the impact of PEELI training in Multan and found that PEELI-trained headteachers had better institutional performance in terms of teacher attendance and student learning outcomes. However, the study was limited to a single district and did not account for contextual variables.

Aziz (2022) conducted a quantitative study in Lahore and reported that distributed leadership was moderately prevalent in public schools and had a positive effect on organizational culture. Jamil, Sewani, and Muhammad (2024) surveyed teachers across six districts and found that supportive leadership practices were positively correlated with teacher job satisfaction and commitment. While these studies offer valuable insights, they often focus on isolated leadership styles and lack a comprehensive framework linking leadership practices to institutional performance metrics such as enrollment, dropout rates, and exam results.

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

Most studies in Punjab are single-method or district-specific, limiting generalizability. There is a lack of mixed-method research that combines quantitative performance data with qualitative leadership narratives. Few studies integrate all three leadership models transformational, instructional, and distributed within a single framework. The role of contextual factors such as policy interference, infrastructure deficits, and socio-political dynamics in shaping leadership effectiveness remains underexplored.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature, a conceptual framework can be developed where transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership styles serve as independent variables. Institutional performance, measured through indicators like student results, teacher attendance, and school climate, is the dependent variable. Adaptive strategies and contextual challenges serve as moderating or mediating variables.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase precedes the qualitative phase, allowing for statistical generalization followed by in-depth explanation. The combination of methods strengthens the validity and comprehensiveness of the research.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The population includes headteachers of all government secondary schools across Punjab. The sampling technique is stratified random sampling, stratified by district and urban/rural settings to ensure diversity. A sample of 300 headteachers were selected for the quantitative survey, while 12 headteachers (representing diverse contexts) were purposively selected for qualitative interviews.

3.3 Data Collection Tools

A structured questionnaire adapted from Leithwood et al. (2006) and Hallinger's Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) was used to assess leadership practices. Institutional performance was measured through data on student achievement (PEC scores), teacher attendance, retention rates, and community involvement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore headteachers' lived experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

The instruments undergo content validation by a panel of educational experts. A pilot study was conducted, and reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha whose value was 0.80 . Factor analysis was also performed to confirm construct validity.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regressions were used to test hypotheses. Mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro. Qualitative data was transcribed and coded thematically using NVivo, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was sought from all study participants. Confidentiality and anonymity is maintained, and data is also securely stored.

4. Results

Table 4.1. Descriptive statistics (N = 300)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	Cronbach's α
Transformational Leadership (TL)	3.78	0.53	2.10	4.95	.91
Instructional Leadership (IL)	3.62	0.49	2.20	4.80	.88
Distributed Leadership (DL)	3.44	0.57	1.95	4.85	.86
Institutional Performance Index (IPI)	71.32	9.41	48.00	93.00	.83

Results of the table 4.1 shows that reliability for IPI reflects internal consistency of its four sub scales (achievement, attendance, retention, community participation).Mean scores exceed the scale mid-point (= 3), indicating moderate high uptake of all three leadership approaches. IPI shows a reasonably high grand mean (71.32/100), but the SD (9.41) signals notable performance variation among schools.

Bivariate Relationships

Table 4.2 Pearson correlations among study variables

	1. TL	2. IL	3. DL	4. IPI
1. TL	–			
2. IL	.54	–		
3. DL	.63	.49	–	
4. IPI	.43	.46	.55	–

p < .01.

Results of the table 4.2 compute the bi variate relationship among the study variable. All three leadership styles correlate significantly with institutional performance, with the strongest zero-order link observed for DL (r = .55). Collinearity diagnostics (VIF < 2.0) suggest acceptable independence for multivariate tests.

Multiple Regressions

Table 4.3. Hierarchical regression predicting Institutional Performance (IPI)

Step	Predictor	β	t	p	ΔR²
1	TL	.21	4.02	<.001	
	IL	.24	4.58	<.001	.28
2	DL	.35	6.97	<.001	.11

Total R²   .39

Results of the study table 4.3 compute the multiple regression of the study variable. Results shows that after controlling for TL and IL (Step 1), DL contributes an additional 11 % of explained variance in IPI (p < .001). In the final model, DL is the strongest unique predictor (β = .35), lending preliminary support to H3's mediating logic.

4.4 Mediation Test (H3)

PROCESS Model 4 (5,000 bootstraps) examined DL as a mediator between TL and IPI.
Direct effect (c′):   TL → IPI = 0.31 (SE = 0.09), p < .001.
Indirect effect (a × b):   TL → DL → IPI = 0.22; 95 % CI \[0.13, 0.33] (no zero).
Total effect (c):   0.53, p < .001.
Proportion mediated: **41 %.**

Results of the mediation test shows that TL exerts both direct and indirect influences on institutional performance, with 41 % of its total effect transmitted via DL. This fully corroborates H3.

Table 4.5 Hypotheses Summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Supported?	Evidence
H1	TL → IPI (+)	**Yes**	β = .21, p < .001
H2	IL → Student achievement (+)	**Yes**	r = .48, p < .001
H3	DL mediates TL–IPI	**Yes**	Indirect effect .22, CI does not include 0

4.6 Qualitative Findings

Three dominant themes surfaced: (a) Adaptive Resourcefulness (creative budgeting, community fund-raising); (b) Teacher Empowerment (peer coaching, shared decision boards); and (c) Navigating Bureaucracy (relationship management with district officials). These narratives explained how statistical links manifest on the ground, enriching the quantitative model.

5. Results Discussion

The study set out to determine how leadership practices of Punjab headteachers relate to institutional performance. Consistent with transformational-leadership theory (Leithwood et al., 2006) and prior Pakistani research (Arshad et al., 2024), transformational and instructional behaviours were both positively related to performance. However, distributed leadership emerged as the most potent predictor and a key mediator, echoing Harris's (2008) contention that shared leadership amplifies organisational capacity in resource-poor contexts.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

- Findings validate an integrative framework where transformational vision sets direction, instructional focus tightens pedagogical quality, and distributed processes operationalise change, jointly explaining 39 % of performance variance.
- The partial mediation of TL by DL extends Hallinger's path model by empirically quantifying the indirect mechanism in a Global-South setting.

5.2 Practical Implications

- CPD and PEELI modules should embed structured opportunities for headteachers to practice delegation, shared goal-setting, and teacher leadership because instructional leadership correlated highly with achievement, schools should institutionalise formative assessment cycles.
- Distributed leadership thrives when teachers co-construct solutions; district authorities can incentivise PLCs through micro-grants and recognition schemes.

5.3 Contextual Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Qualitative data underscored chronic budget shortages and bureaucratic hurdles. Adaptive leadership leveraging community partnerships and informal networks enabled leaders to mitigate these constraints, aligning with "cross-boundary leadership" theory.

5.4 Limitations

The design of present research study was cross sectional therefore, causality cannot be definitively inferred. Leadership responses were headteacher-reported so there can be a chance of biased approach. However, future studies could triangulate with teacher and student perspectives.

6. Recommendations

Based on the results of the study the existing research study recommends that:-

- Embed Distributed-Leadership Competencies in headteacher appraisal scales and promotion criteria.
- Strengthen Instructional Coaching Structures by assigning senior teachers as master coaches under headteacher oversight.
- Allocate Flexible School Improvement Grants to empower site based decision making.
- Institutes at district level should maintain data dashboards to monitor IPI indicators in real time, enabling evidence driven leadership actions.
- Scale Mentorship Programs pairing high performing headteachers with schools in challenging locales to transfer adaptive strategies.

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