



The Effect of Teachers Perceived Principals' Ethical Leadership on Teacher Motivation Through Teacher Trust: A Quantitative PLS-Sem Study in Gwadar District, Balochistan, Pakistan

Mukhtar Bashir¹, Dr. Qurat Ul Ain², Dr. Abdul Rahim³, Shagufta Ambreen⁴

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Education, Alhamd Islamic University, Quetta

Email: mukhtar.bashir@ug.edu.pk

² Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Alhamd Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: quratul.ain@Alhamd.pk

³ Associate Professor, Department of International relation, Alhamd Islamic University, Quetta, Pakistan

Email: raheem_qta@hotmail.com

⁴ Head of department, Department of Education, Alhamd Islamic University, Quetta, Pakistan

Email: shagufta.umbreen@alhamd.pk

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: June 23, 2026 Revised: July 06, 2026 Accepted: July 20, 2026 Available Online: August 04, 2026 Keywords: ethical leadership; teacher trust; autonomous motivation; PLS-SEM; self-determination theory; Gwadar; Balochistan Corresponding author: Mukhtar Bashir Email: mukhtar.bashir@ug.edu.pk	The role of principals' ethical behavior has been acknowledged in the literature as an important factor in determining educational achievement. In this study, the effect of principals' ethical leadership as perceived by teachers (PEL) on teachers' autonomous teacher motivation (ATM) was examined, with teacher trust in the principal (TTP) as the mediator. The research is based on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and a quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among 250 in-service teachers from public and private schools in Gwadar district, Balochistan, Pakistan, using three adapted and validated instruments. The analysis of the collected data was performed through PLS-SEM using SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024). Reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.959$; $\rho_c \geq 0.966$) and convergent validity (AVE ≥ 0.778) have been established in the outer model, and construct discriminant validity has been verified through HTMT ratios < 0.65. Structural estimation revealed significant direct effects of PEL on ATM ($\beta = 0.324$, $p < .001$), PEL on TTP ($\beta = 0.540$, $p < .001$), and TTP on ATM ($\beta = 0.449$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the specific indirect relationship between PEL and ATM through TTP was also statistically significant ($\beta = 0.243$, 95% BC CI [0.175, 0.322], $p < .001$). Together, the variables explained 46.4% of the variation in ATM and 29.1% of the variation in TTP. It is therefore clear that principals' ethical behavior plays a very important role in institutional trust, which, in turn, energizes teachers' autonomous motivation. Practical and policy implications for school administration, professional development, and educational governance in under-resourced coastal districts are elaborated.

Introduction

Background

The quality of school leaders is considered one of the most influential factors in effective schooling (Irfan et al., 2024). Within several aspects of this construct, the ethical behavior of the principal through fairness, truthfulness, consideration towards others, and exemplifying professionalism has been extensively studied by scholars (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño et al., 2003). Brown et al.

(2005) define ethical leadership as modeling ethical behavior and promoting it through regular two-way communication, organizational support, and ethical decision-making. In educational organizations where relational trust defines overall functioning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), the ethics of principals become relevant.

Numerous studies have shown that ethical leadership positively affects follower variables, including organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and work engagement (Resick et al., 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2011). At the same time, little is known about the processes underlying ethical leadership's effects on autonomous teacher motivation – intrinsic and identified motivational orientations within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), especially in less privileged contexts such as coastal Balochistan, Pakistan.

Teachers' trust in their principal is an important yet understudied mediating process in this relationship. As Mayer et al. (1995) have argued, leadership trust implies the willingness of people to be professionally vulnerable based on good expectations about the intentions and behavior of the leader and can mediate leadership impact on motivation by creating psychological safety needed for autonomous professional behavior (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999).

Gwadar District, located within the Makran coastal belt, is an important yet underdeveloped area. While undergoing unprecedented development as part of the CPEC project, the schools in Gwadar face multiple problems, including teacher absenteeism, teacher motivation, and poorly established leadership practices. The study of how principals' ethical values affect teacher motivation through trust is therefore crucial in this setting.

Problem Statement

Although there is considerable research on ethical leadership globally, very little literature examines the impact of ethical leadership on the motivation of teachers working autonomously, through the intermediary channel of teacher trust in the principal (Biniaminov & Moshel, 2025; Urooj et al., 2024). All previous studies on the topic have either been conducted in Western organizational settings or have considered trust and motivation in isolation (Fulmer et al., 2024; Javidan et al., 2022). This study attempts to bridge this gap by formulating a model of mediation in which teacher trust in the principal serves as the mediating channel for the impact of ethical leadership on motivation.

Research Objectives

These three interrelated research goals have been set forth for this study: (a) To show the predictive relationship between PEL and ATM; (b) To determine the relationship between PEL and teacher trust; and (c) To find out whether teacher trust in the principal acts as a mediator between PEL and ATM.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is the perception of principals' ethical leadership a predictor of autonomous teacher motivation? RQ2: Is the perception of ethical leadership a predictor of teachers' trust in the principal? RQ3: Is teachers' trust in the principal a predictor of autonomous teacher motivation? RQ4: Is teachers' trust in the principal a significant mediator between ethical leadership and autonomous teacher motivation?

Significance of the Study

In theory, this research expands the scope of SLT and SDT to include school leadership in an underserved Pakistani context. **In the methodology**, PLS-SEM is used, an advanced and suitable approach for such a mediation process involving social science data. **In practice**, results can inform school leaders' behavior, inspiring trust and motivation among teachers.

Scope, Limitations, and Ethical Considerations

The study is delimited to in-service schoolteachers in Gwadar District at primary through higher secondary levels. Temporal causal inference is precluded by the cross-sectional design, and convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings. Self-

reported data introduces potential common method bias. Respondents provided informed consent voluntarily; identities were fully protected, and data were handled in strict confidence solely for academic purposes.

Review of Literature

Ethical Leadership in Schools

The Ethical Leadership Scale developed by Brown et al. (2005) operationalizes the construct through leaders' morally appropriate personal actions, their ethical role modeling grounded in integrity and justice, and value-oriented communication with subordinates. The underlying theory is Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which holds that ethical leaders serve as role models of moral actions that followers observe, learn, and imitate. In educational settings, ethical leaders act fairly in decision-making, communication, and value orientation (Greenfield, 2004).

Empirical findings suggest a positive relationship between ethical leadership and teachers' organizational commitment (Fernandez, 2026; Gomes Neves, 2024; Neves, 2025; Okçu, 2021; Cerit, 2009), job satisfaction (Soysal & Jafarova, 2024; Yilmaz, 2010), and professionalism (Fernandez, 2026). Several research studies conducted in Pakistan have established a positive association between the ethics of school principals and teachers' performance in Punjab (Ahmad, 2023; Sabir, 2021; Urooj et al., 2024). However, little is known about the connection between the ethics of school principals and teachers in the coastal areas of Balochistan province.

Teacher Trust in the Principal

According to the well-established model by Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999), teacher trust in the school principal comprises five related components, namely, *Benevolence, Honesty, Openness, Reliability, and Competence*. It has been shown that principals' ethical behavior is a key predictor of teachers' trust in their superiors: principals who are honest and care about their subordinates can foster an environment in which trust can develop (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). The research has revealed positive relationships between teacher trust and teacher cooperation (Goddard et al., 2001), professionalism (Geijsel et al., 2009), and willingness to experiment with teaching techniques (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

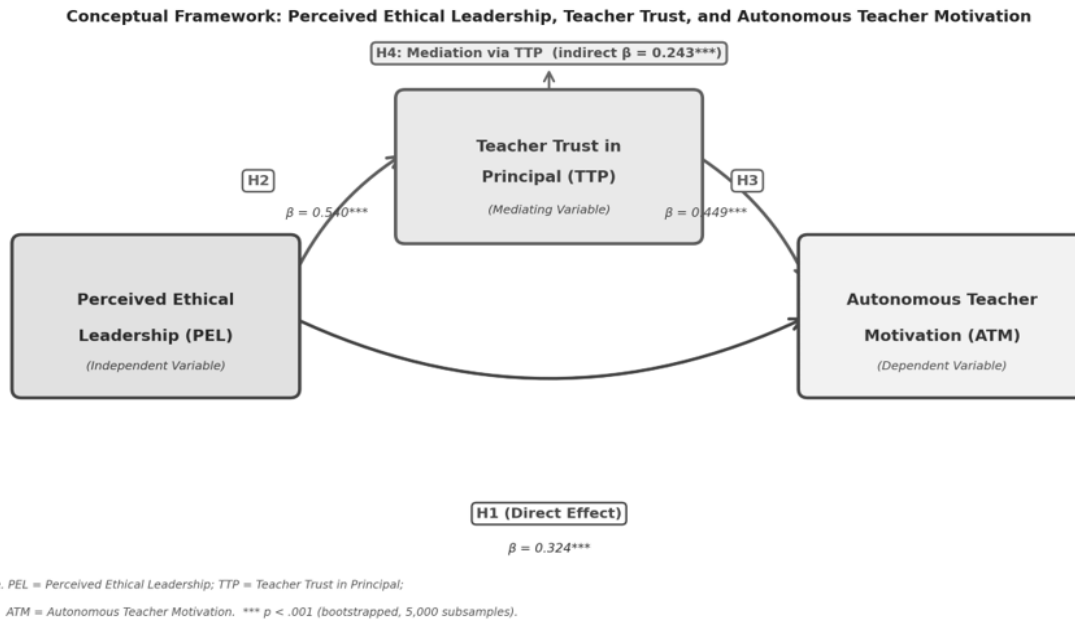
Autonomous Teacher Motivation

Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) identify a motivational continuum ranging from amotivation to progressively more internalized, controlled motivations (external and introjected regulation) to the fully autonomous set of motivations (identified regulation and intrinsic motivation). Autonomy motivation occurs when one engages in an activity for its own sake, driven by personal commitment and endorsement. In the teaching profession, this motivational orientation means engaging in teaching for its own sake and as a personally meaningful endeavor, resulting in more effective instruction and improved learning outcomes (Roth et al., 2007). The main assertion in SDT is that three basic psychological needs need to be satisfied to develop autonomy motivation.

Theoretical Framework and Development of Hypothesis

Social Learning Theory and Self-Determination Theory Integration

This study brings together Social Learning Theory and SDT to elucidate the effect of ethical leadership on autonomous motivation through the lens of trust. According to Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), the mechanism through which PEL→TTP occurs involves observation; leaders whose ethical practices create a model of trust are cognitively perceived by teachers and elicit trust in institutions. SDT then explains the mechanism through which TTP→ATM occurs; trust provides the relational context necessary for meeting the teacher's basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—prerequisites identified by SDT for autonomous motivation to occur (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

**Figure 1**

Conceptual Framework: Perceived Ethical Leadership, Teacher Trust, and Autonomous Teacher Motivation

Note. PEL = Perceived Ethical Leadership; TTP = Teacher Trust in Principal; ATM = Autonomous Teacher Motivation

Hypothesis Development

H1: *Perceived principals' ethical leadership will exert a significant positive direct influence on autonomous teacher motivation.*

Ethical principals that demonstrate fairness, transparency, and genuine concern for teachers create supportive environments that affirm teachers' professional identity and purpose—conditions theorized to enhance intrinsic valuation of teaching (Brown et al., 2005; Roth et al., 2007).

H2: *Perceived principals' ethical leadership will exert a significant positive direct influence on teacher trust in the principal.*

Ethical leaders demonstrate the core dimensions of trust—benevolence, integrity, competence—through consistent ethical conduct (Brown et al., 2005). Meta-analytic evidence confirms that ethical leadership is among the strongest predictors of follower trust (Ng & Feldman, 2015).

H3: *Teacher trust in the principal will exert a significant positive direct influence on autonomous teacher motivation.*

Trust in the principal provides relational security, enabling teachers to exercise professional judgment, receive appropriate recognition, and experience genuine interpersonal connection—need satisfactions that promote autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

H4: *Teacher trust in the principal will significantly mediate the pathway from perceived principals' ethical leadership to autonomous teacher motivation.*

Integrating Social Learning Theory and SDT, trust is positioned as the conduit converting ethical leadership into autonomous motivational outcomes: ethical conduct generates trust, and trust satisfies the basic psychological needs that drive autonomous motivation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2018).

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional research design. SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024) was used with a PLS-SEM approach due to its suitability for small sample sizes and non-normal distributions.

Population and Sampling

Respondents were teachers from Gwadar District, Balochistan, from public and private schools at all levels, including elementary, middle, high, and higher secondary schools. The sample was selected using convenience sampling. A total of 280 respondents were provided with the questionnaire; 256 were returned, yielding a 91.4% response rate. A total of 250 questionnaires have been retained after discarding unqualified responses that do not meet the minimum PLS-SEM requirements (Hair et al.).

Measures

Perceived Principals' Ethical Leadership

In total, the questionnaire consisted of 10 items to measure the principal's ethical behavior (Brown et al., 2005) using ELS. The revised questionnaire replaced the terms "principal" and "leader" with "teachers" and "employees", respectively. A Likert scale was used to assess responses on a 1-5 scale. For example, "My principal/school administrator demonstrates ethical conduct in personal and professional matters."

Teacher Trust in Principal

The Principal subscale, comprising eight items from the Omnibus T-Scale (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999), assessed teacher trust. This scale looks at 5 constructs of trust – kindness, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. A sample piece of evidence is: 'My principal/school administrator is honest in dealings with teachers' (TTP2).

Autonomous Teacher Motivation

The Autonomous Motivation for Teaching Scale included 8 items for the assessment (Roth et al., 2007). The items refer to identified regulations (ATM1-ATM4) and intrinsic motivation (ATM5-ATM8). An example question is: "I feel fulfilled when I give students meaningful learning experiences." (ATM8).

Data Analysis Procedure

The two-stage PLS-SEM method followed from Hair et al. (2022). The first stage was the evaluation of the outer model, which was conducted across four areas. These were indicator reliability (indicator loadings ≥ 0.708), consistency (Cronbach's α and $\rho_c \geq 0.70$), convergent validity (AVE ≥ 0.50), and discriminant validity using the HTMT (< 0.85) and Fornell-Larcker criteria. The next step involved analyzing the inner model using path coefficients, two-tailed bootstrapped confidence intervals from a set of 5,000 subsamples (95% BC), evaluation of R^2 , f^2 effect sizes, and SRMR model fit. To observe mediation, it was checked whether the indirect effect CI includes zero.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Data for the analysis were collected from 250 teachers in the Gwadar district. Full details of the distribution are shown in Table 1. Regarding gender distribution, 130 were females (52.0%) and 118 males (47.2%), while 2 teachers refused to reveal their gender (0.8%). The modal age band was 25–30 years ($n = 90$, 36.0%), followed by the 36–40 cohort ($n = 83$, 33.2%) and the 31–35 cohort ($n = 77$, 30.8%). Regarding academic qualifications, 165 participants (66.0%) held Bachelor's degrees, and 85 (34.0%) held Master's degrees. Professional tenure spanned 1–5 years ($n = 90$, 36.0%), 6–10 years ($n = 77$, 30.8%), and 11–15 years ($n = 83$, 33.2%). Public institutions accounted for 61.6% of the sample ($n = 154$), and 62.8% ($n = 157$) were permanently employed.

Table 1

Demography of the Sample (N = 250)

Variable	Category	Number	Percent
Gender	Female	130	52.0
	Male	118	47.2
	Prefer not to say	2	0.8
Age Group	25–30 years	90	36.0
	31–35 years	77	30.8
	36–40 years	83	33.2
Qualification	Bachelor	165	66.0
	Master	85	34.0
Teaching Experience	1–5 years	90	36.0
	6–10 years	77	30.8
	11–15 years	83	33.2
School Type	Public	154	61.6
	Private	90	36.0
	Other	6	2.4
School Level	Primary	94	37.6

Variable	Category	Number	Percent
Employment Status	Middle	62	24.8
	Secondary	78	31.2
	Higher Secondary	16	6.4
	Permanent	157	62.8
	Contract	93	37.2

Measurement Model Assessment

Outer loadings for all 26 indicators are reported in Table 2. Each item surpassed the 0.708 acceptability benchmark, with values spanning from 0.848 (TTP1) to 0.906 (PEL4 and TTP5); bootstrap significance was confirmed for all ($p < .001$), and no items required deletion.

Table 2

Outer Loadings – Indicator Reliability Assessment (N = 250)

Item	Construct	Outer Loading (λ)	T-Statistic	p-value
01PEL	Perceived Ethical Leadership(PEL)	0.891	55.445	< .001
02PEL	PEL	0.849	42.129	< .001
03PEL	PEL	0.895	56.404	< .001
04PEL	PEL	0.906	73.882	< .001
05PEL	PEL	0.887	54.583	< .001
06PEL	PEL	0.899	63.606	< .001
07PEL	PEL	0.885	56.190	< .001
08PEL	PEL	0.859	48.749	< .001
09PEL	PEL	0.889	61.665	< .001
10PEL	PEL	0.881	53.321	< .001
01TTP	Teacher Trust in Principal(TTP)	0.848	51.528	< .001

Item	Construct	Outer Loading (λ)	T-Statistic	p-value
<i>o2TTP</i>	TTP	0.892	71.947	< .001
<i>o3TTP</i>	TTP	0.897	69.899	< .001
<i>o4TTP</i>	TTP	0.884	62.683	< .001
<i>o5TTP</i>	TTP	0.906	75.661	< .001
<i>o6TTP</i>	TTP	0.888	63.481	< .001
<i>o7TTP</i>	TTP	0.893	68.769	< .001
<i>o8TTP</i>	TTP	0.896	71.500	< .001
<i>o1ATM</i>	Autonomous Teacher Motivation(ATM)	0.884	54.648	< .001
<i>o2ATM</i>	ATM	0.888	54.076	< .001
<i>o3ATM</i>	ATM	0.876	45.436	< .001
<i>o4ATM</i>	ATM	0.881	52.922	< .001
<i>o5ATM</i>	ATM	0.886	57.251	< .001
<i>o6ATM</i>	ATM	0.897	67.261	< .001
<i>o7ATM</i>	ATM	0.890	58.770	< .001
<i>o8ATM</i>	ATM	0.855	41.189	< .001

Note. PEL = Perceived Ethical Leadership; TTP = Teacher Trust in Principal; ATM = Autonomous Teacher Motivation. T-statistics from 5,000-subsample bootstrapping (two-tailed).

Table 3 provides an overview of the construct-level reliability and validity. Cronbach's α was consistently above .959, ρ_c values surpassed .966, and all AVE estimates exceeded .778—collectively confirming robust internal consistency and satisfactory convergent validity for each construct.

Table 3*Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity (N = 250)*

Construct	Cronbach's α	ρ_a	ρ_c	AVE
Perceived Ethical Leadership (PEL)	0.969	0.970	0.973	0.782
Teacher Trust in Principal (TTP)	0.962	0.962	0.968	0.789
Autonomous Teacher Motivation (ATM)	0.959	0.960	0.966	0.778

Note. ρ_a = Dijkstra-Henseler composite reliability; ρ_c = Jöreskog composite reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted. Minimum acceptability thresholds: $\alpha \geq .70$; $\rho_c \geq .70$; AVE $\geq .50$ (Hair et al., 2022).

Construct discriminant validity was verified through two complementary procedures—HTMT ratios (Table 4) and Fornell-Larcker comparison (Table 5). HTMT coefficients for all construct pairs stayed below the 0.85 threshold, and each construct's $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ (bold diagonal in Table 5) exceeded every off-diagonal correlation in its respective row and column.

Table 4*Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) – Discriminant Validity*

Construct	1. ATM	2. PEL	3. TTP
1. Autonomous Teacher Motivation (ATM)	—		
2. Perceived Ethical Leadership (PEL)	0.586	—	
3. Teacher Trust in Principal (TTP)	0.649	0.557	—

Note. Sub-diagonal entries denote HTMT ratios. All values fall below the 0.85 threshold (Henseler et al., 2015), confirming adequate construct distinctiveness.

Table 5*Fornell-Larcker Criterion – Construct Distinctiveness*

Construct	1. ATM	2. PEL	3. TTP
1. Autonomous Teacher Motivation (ATM)	0.882		
2. Perceived Ethical Leadership (PEL)	0.566	0.884	
3. Teacher Trust in Principal (TTP)	0.624	0.540	0.888

Note. Bold diagonal values represent $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$. Off-diagonal values show inter-construct correlations. Discriminant validity is confirmed when each diagonal value is greater than all off-diagonal values in its row and column.

Structural Model Assessment

The PLS-SEM is shown in Figure 2, a path diagram generated in SmartPLS 4 prior to the formal structural evaluation. Inner model assessment covered model fit indices, coefficient of determination (R^2), path coefficients, specific indirect effects, and f^2 effect sizes in sequence.

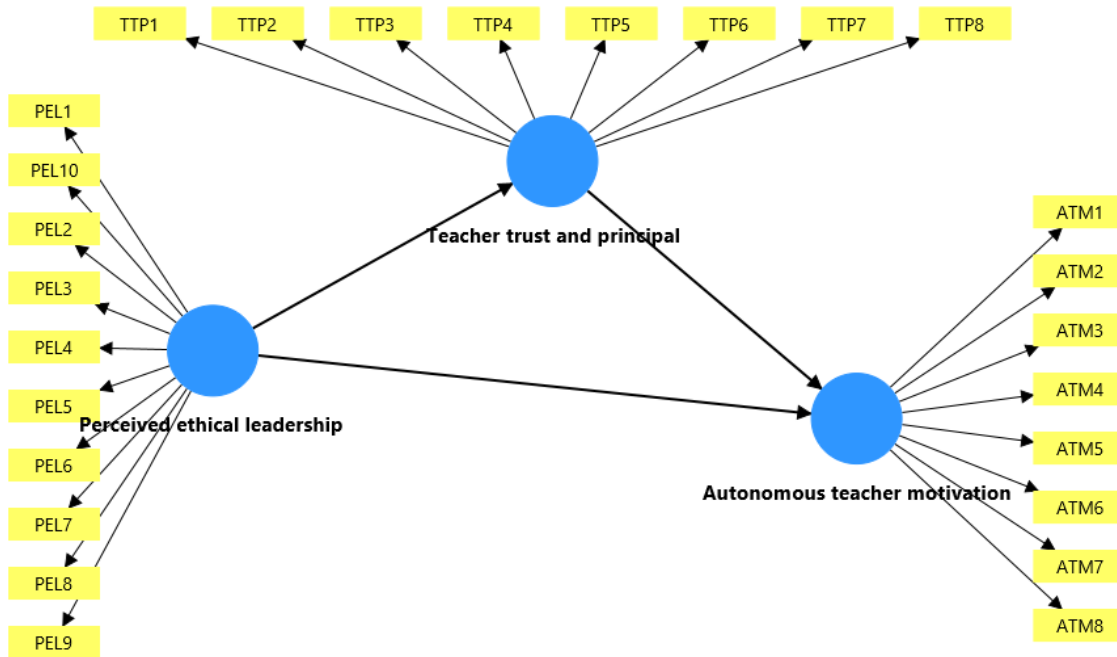


Figure 2

PLS-SEM Structural Path Model – SmartPLS 4 Output

Note. PEL = Perceived Ethical Leadership; TTP = Teacher Trust and Principal; ATM = Autonomous Teacher Motivation. Outer indicators (PEL1–PEL10, TTP1–TTP8, ATM1–ATM8) reflect the latent variables. Generated using SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024).

Model fit indices indicated acceptable fit: SRMR = 0.031 (threshold < 0.08) and NFI = 0.948 (threshold > 0.90). Structural VIF values for all predictors ranged from 1.00 to 1.41—substantially below the 5.0 ceiling—signaling no collinearity concerns. R^2 outcomes are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6

Coefficient of Determination (R^2) for Endogenous Constructs

Endogenous Construct	R^2	R^2 Adjusted	Variance Explained
Autonomous Teacher Motivation (ATM)	0.464	0.459	46.4%
Teacher Trust in Principal (TTP)	0.291	0.289	29.1%

Note. R^2 values of 0.25, 0.50, and 0.75 show weak, moderate, and strong explanatory power, respectively

(Hair et al., 2022). ATM R^2 = 0.464 reflects moderate-to-substantial predictive adequacy.

Bootstrapped path estimates (5,000 subsamples), reported in Table 7, confirmed statistical significance and positive directionality for all three hypothesized direct relationships. H1 was supported: PEL predicted ATM ($\beta = 0.324$, $T = 5.514$, $p < .001$). H2 was strongly supported: PEL predicted TTP ($\beta = 0.540$, $T = 12.000$, $p < .001$). H3 was supported: TTP predicted ATM ($\beta = 0.449$, $T = 8.193$, $p < .001$).

Table 7

Direct Effects – Path Coefficients (Bootstrapping, 5,000 Subsamples)

H	Path	β	S.E.	T-Statistic	p-value	95% BC CI	Decision
H1	PEL $\rightarrow$ ATM	0.324	0.059	5.514	< .001	[0.209, 0.434]	Supported
H2	PEL $\rightarrow$ TTP	0.540	0.045	12.000	< .001	[0.449, 0.625]	Supported
H3	TTP $\rightarrow$ ATM	0.449	0.055	8.193	< .001	[0.341, 0.557]	Supported

Note. β = standardised path coefficient; S.E. = standard error; BC CI = Bias-Corrected Confidence Interval. PEL = Perceived Ethical Leadership; TTP = Teacher Trust in Principal; ATM = Autonomous Teacher Motivation.

Indirect and total effects are presented in Table 8. Hypothesis H4 was supported: the particular indirect effect of PEL on ATM through TTP showed that $\beta = 0.243$ ($T = 6.439$, $p < .001$, 95% BC CI [0.175, 0.322]). Since the H1 hypothesis's direct effect ($\beta = 0.324$) remained significant, along with the indirect effect estimate, it is possible to conclude that partial mediation occurred. The total effect of PEL on ATM made $\beta = 0.566$.

Table 8

Indirect and Total Effects – Mediation Analysis

H	Pathway	β	S.E.	T-Statistic	p-value	95% BC CI	Decision
H4	PEL $\rightarrow$ TTP $\rightarrow$ ATM (Indirect)	0.243	0.038	6.439	< .001	[0.175, 0.322]	Supported
—	PEL $\rightarrow$ ATM (Total)	0.566	0.046	12.208	< .001	[0.469, 0.649]	—
—	PEL $\rightarrow$ TTP (Total)	0.540	0.045	12.000	< .001	[0.449, 0.625]	—
—	TTP $\rightarrow$ ATM (Total)	0.449	0.055	8.193	< .001	[0.341, 0.557]	—

Note. Mediation is confirmed when the bootstrapped indirect effect CI excludes zero (Hayes, 2018). Partial mediation: the H1 direct effect retains significance alongside the significant H4 indirect effect. BC CI = Bias-Corrected Bootstrap Confidence Interval.

As illustrated in Table 9 below, the effect size for the PEL-to-TTP relationship was large, with an f^2 of 0.411. The effect size of the TTP-to-ATM relationship was of medium-to-large magnitude, with an f^2 of 0.267. On the other hand, the effect size of the PEL-to-ATM relationship was small to medium with an f^2 of 0.138. Based on the above findings, it is clear that trust is the key mediating factor in the relationship between EL and motivation.

Table 9*Effect Sizes (f^2) for Hypothesized Path Relationships*

Path Relationship	f^2	Interpretation
PEL → ATM (Direct Effect)	0.138	Small-to-medium effect
PEL → TTP	0.411	Large effect
TTP → ATM	0.267	Medium-to-large effect

Note. Effect size benchmarks: $f^2 = 0.02$ (small), 0.15 (medium), 0.35 (large; Cohen, 1988). PEL = Perceived Ethical Leadership; TTP = Teacher Trust in Principal; ATM = Autonomous Teacher Motivation.

Discussion

Direct Effect of Ethical Leadership on Autonomous Motivation (H1)

H1 was empirically confirmed ($\beta = 0.324$, $p < .001$). School environments in which principals display behaviors that demonstrate justice, integrity, and true concern for their staff's well-being are consistent with SDT's predictions for fostering autonomous motivation (ATM) (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Previous findings in educational settings support this result (Cerit, 2009; Leithwood & Sun, 2012), and this research extends it to an area that has not been studied before – coastal Balochistan. The direct effect of small-to-medium magnitude ($f^2 = 0.138$) is theoretically adequate in the framework of partial mediation.

Direct Effect of Ethical Leadership on Teacher Trust (H2)

All direct paths showed that H2 was the best-supported one empirically ($\beta = 0.540$, $T = 12.000$, $f^2 = 0.411$), indicating that the ethical behavior of the principals was the best institutional antecedent of teacher trust in terms of theory (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000) and meta-analysis results (Ng & Feldman, 2015). Given that Gwadar District's leaders have historically fostered a culture of distrust in institutions, it is quite likely that ethical behavior on the part of the principals may help re-establish institutional trust among teachers.

Direct Effect of Teacher Trust on Autonomous Motivation (H3)

H3 was supported ($\beta = 0.449$, $T = 8.193$, $f^2 = 0.267$). When teachers place trust in their principal, they gain autonomy to make their own decisions, sufficient recognition for what they do (competence support), and real relationships (relatedness support)—the three needs that, according to Self-Determination Theory, provide a basis for autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The relative salience of this trust-motivation pathway may reflect the hierarchical and interpersonal nature of Pakistani school structures, where the principal-teacher relationship is especially consequential for motivational dynamics.

Mediating Role of Teacher Trust (H4)

H4 was supported (indirect $\beta = 0.243$, 95% BC CI [0.175, 0.322], $p < .001$). In the partial mediation model, both the direct and indirect effects were significant, indicating that there are two channels through which ethical leadership impacts autonomous motivation: the direct channels of norm internalization and value congruence, and the indirect channel of trust. The above result incorporates SLT and SDT into a single explanatory model that can be used to explain school leadership in underprivileged areas of Pakistan, particularly in the coastal region of Balochistan.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study provides a theoretical basis for extending the scope of Social Learning Theory and Self-Determination Theory by applying them to leadership in schools in a regionally disadvantaged area of Pakistan. This research shows that modeling ethical leadership builds trust between teachers and other school employees, which, in turn, fulfills individuals' basic psychological needs and leads to the emergence of autonomous motivation. At the applied level, the implications of the findings can be interpreted as the ability of principals' ethical behavior to serve as a motivating factor for teachers.

In light of the above considerations, the professional development programs for principals in the Gwadar district should focus specifically on developing competencies in ethical leadership. Such competencies can include open communication, fair and equitable resource distribution, and conflict-resolution processes. Besides, the accountability measures and ways to give teachers a voice in the district need to be elaborated by the education authorities.

Conclusion, Future Research, and Limitations

Conclusion

The present study explored the effect of principals' perceived ethical leadership on teachers' autonomous motivation through teacher trust, using data collected from 250 schoolteachers in Gwadar district schools. The hypotheses regarding all four research constructs were confirmed using PLS-SEM. PEL was a significant predictor of ATM ($\beta = 0.324$) and teacher trust ($\beta = 0.540$), while teacher trust was an independent predictor of autonomous motivation ($\beta = 0.449$). Teacher trust also transmitted the influence of PEL on autonomous motivation by a significant indirect path (indirect $\beta = 0.243$). The predictors explained 46.4% of the variance in ATM and 29.1% of the variance in teacher trust.

Limitations and Future Research

It is impossible to determine causal relationships with a cross-sectional survey design; longitudinal surveys and quasi-experimental designs can provide more robust causal evidence. Reliance on self-reported data introduces potential common method variance; a multi-informant research design can address this problem in future research. The sample was taken using convenience sampling from Gwadar District, which affects the external validity of the study; in the future, stratified random sampling across different districts of Balochistan should be used. Future studies might also expand the set of outcome variables to include controlled motivation, burnout, absenteeism, and student performance.

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