

Trust in Educational Leadership: A Structural Equation Modeling Study of Empathy, Management Support, and Relational Transparency

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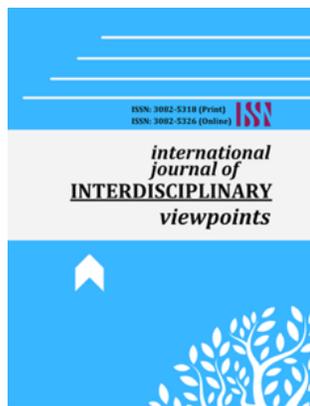
International Journal of Interdisciplinary Viewpoints

Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 45–52, 2026

How to Cite

Baog, I., & Cueme, R. J. (2026). Trust in Educational Leadership: A Structural Equation Modeling Study of Empathy, Management Support, and Relational Transparency. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Viewpoints*, 2(2), 45–52. <https://doi.org/10.64612/ijiv.v2i2.71>

Research Article



Open-access & Peer-reviewed

Received: 29 Nov 2025

Revised: 2 Feb 2026

Accepted: 20 Feb 2026

ABSTRACT

Trust in educational leadership remains a persistent concern in school organizations, particularly in relation to leaders' relational practices. This study examined teachers' trust in school leaders by modeling the influence of empathy, management support practices, and relational transparency using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional design was employed, involving 400 public junior high school teachers from a public school context in the Philippines. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression, confirmatory factor analysis, and SEM. Results showed high levels of perceived trust, empathy, management support, and relational transparency. While all three leadership variables were significantly associated with trust in preliminary analyses, SEM results identified a parsimonious best-fitting model in which empathy and relational transparency emerged as significant direct predictors of teachers' trust, whereas management support practices were not retained in the final structural model. The findings highlight the central role of relational leadership qualities in shaping trust in school leaders and demonstrate the value of SEM in explaining complex leadership dynamics. Implications for leadership practice, policy, and future research are discussed.

Keywords

educational leadership, empathy, relational transparency, structural equation modeling

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INTRODUCTION

Trust in educational leadership is an important part of running a school well. This is because it affects how teachers understand their leaders' intentions, how they respond to administrative decisions, and how they collaborate on professional projects. Within school districts, how leaders act has a big impact on how engaged, committed, and trustworthy teachers perceive their principals. Leadership styles affect teachers' job satisfaction and retention, indicating that leadership is more than just administrative power and includes the relationships that sustain professional environments (Pedro & Dioso, 2025; Lacaza & Dioso, 2025). When school leaders show that they care about their employees and are responsive, teachers are more likely to trust the company. Furthermore, studies show that teachers' trust in formal leadership and decision-making processes is increased by professional support systems and leadership structures (Ypil et al., 2025; Guiani & Robles, 2025). These results show that trust in leadership is not built solely through formal authority, but also through everyday actions that demonstrate trustworthiness, care, and support for the company. Organizational factors and relational leadership styles both affect how teachers do their jobs in schools. In many school settings, teachers have to deal with complex lesson plans, curriculum changes, and institutional standards, which require constant support and direction from school leaders. K–12 implementation challenges research shows that teachers depend on leadership structures that provide direction, tools, and coordination to address systemic changes in schools (Galaura & Simpal, 2025). At the same time, teachers' narratives show that relational support and understanding from leadership influence their sense of well-being, professional balance, and resilience in the workplace (Barbarona-Gudelosao & Escote, 2025; Cariaga et al., 2025). These circumstances show how leadership styles that foster understanding, support for the group, and open communication can change how people interact in schools. Recognizing teachers' experiences, providing structure, and keeping interactions open are important leadership behaviors that affect teachers' ability to trust their school leaders.

More and more people are realizing that leadership affects school environments, yet much of the current literature still examines leadership dynamics in a piecemeal way. A lot of research studies only look at one aspect of leadership, like style, authority, or teacher skill, without looking at how different types of leadership affect teachers' trust. Researchers who study school management and governance have found that leadership styles often affect teachers' perceptions of the institution's trustworthiness in two ways: relationally and organizationally (Casamayor & Plaga, 2025; Guiani & Robles, 2025). Also, problems in schools today, such as the use of technology and changes in how teachers teach, require leadership styles that are sensitive to people's feelings and effective at running the school (Cariaga et al., 2025). These facts show that trust in educational leadership might come from leadership signals that are linked rather than from leadership behaviors that are separate. However, few empirical studies examine these aspects of leadership within a broader analytical framework.

When discussing this topic, trust in educational leadership means that teachers are willing to rely on school leaders because they believe those leaders are trustworthy, helpful, and genuine in their relationships with them. Three aspects of leadership are especially important in creating this relationship situation. Leaders who show empathy can notice and understand teachers' professional and emotional situations. The structural mechanisms that leaders use to give teachers the tools, communication, expertise, and institutional support they need to do their jobs well are called management support practices. When leaders communicate and make decisions, are they open, honest, and consistent? This is what relational transparency means. These aspects of leadership work together to send relational and organizational signs that affect how teachers trust their leaders. However, looking at these factors in isolation might not fully capture the complex relationships that build trust in school settings.

In the Philippines, leadership relationships are also shaped by what teachers, students, and school communities have been through. Relational trust strengthens educational relationships and encourages collaborative learning environments (Cariaga, 2025; Cariaga & Gerodias, 2025), according to research on community engagement and parental involvement. Existing studies provide valuable insights into leadership styles, teacher experiences, and school management. However, few empirical studies examine how teachers' trust is affected by both relational leadership styles and organizational support mechanisms simultaneously. To close this gap, we need methods that can examine many variables and their relationships within a single analytical framework. Researchers can use Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), a robust statistical method, to test relationships among latent factors, examine the direct and combined effects of leadership dimensions, and identify the structural model that best explains why teachers trust school leaders. This study examines the extent to which teachers trust their school leaders by using SEM to model the effects of school leaders' empathy, management support practices, and relational openness. By using this method, the study aims to demonstrate how these aspects of leadership affect teachers' trust, both personally and collectively, and to offer ideas for improving leadership and management in schools.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design

This study employed a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional research design. It utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the relationships among school leaders' empathy, management support practices, relational transparency, and teachers' trust in educational leadership. A quantitative approach was appropriate because it enables the objective measurement of latent constructs and the statistical examination of hypothesized relationships using numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The cross-sectional design enabled data collection at a single point in time to capture teachers' perceptions within their existing leadership context (Salkind, 2017). SEM was selected over traditional regression techniques because it permits the simultaneous testing of multiple relationships among observed and latent variables while explicitly accounting for measurement error, which is essential in theory-driven leadership research (Kline, 2016; Hair et al., 2019).

Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in public high schools in Davao City, Region XI, Philippines, an educational context characterized by a diverse teacher population. This setting provided sufficient variability in leadership practices and an adequate number of respondents to support the estimation of complex SEM models. Limiting the study to public junior high schools ensured consistency in organizational structures, leadership roles, and policy environments, thereby strengthening internal validity while allowing cautious analytical generalization to similar public secondary school contexts. The participants were 400 public junior high school teachers directly supervised by their current school leaders. This sample size exceeded recommended minimum thresholds for SEM and enhanced the stability of parameter estimates and goodness-of-fit indices (Kline, 2016; Wolf et al., 2013). A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation across schools, stratified by school size or district classification. Simple random sampling within each stratum minimized selection bias. At the same time, inclusion criteria requiring sufficient exposure to current school leaders ensured that respondents could provide informed and reliable perceptions of leadership practices.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire comprising four adapted instruments, each rated on a five-point Likert scale. Teachers' trust in school leaders was measured using an adapted version of the Trust in Leaders Questionnaire (Adams & Sartori, 2006), comprising four dimensions: benevolence, integrity, predictability, and competence. Empathy was assessed using an adapted Empathy Questionnaire (Bruckner, 2017) that measures cognitive empathy, emotional contagion, and emotional sensitivity. Management support practices were measured using the Top Management Support Questionnaire adapted from Ahmed et al. (2016), covering provision of resources, structural arrangements, communication, expertise, and power. Relational transparency was assessed using an adapted instrument based on Masimane et al. (2022) that measured openness, truthfulness, self-disclosure, and mutual trust. All instruments underwent expert validation and pilot testing, yielding excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .929-.982$). Ethical standards were strictly observed, including informed consent, participant anonymity, secure data handling, and compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB) guidelines.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS and AMOS. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were first computed in SPSS, followed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural model testing in AMOS. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed using covariance-based SEM with Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation. Given that ML assumes approximate multivariate normality, preliminary screening was conducted in SPSS, and bootstrapped standard errors and confidence intervals were used as a robustness check when distributional departures were indicated. Prior to CFA and SEM, the dataset was screened for missing data and response quality, univariate and multivariate outliers, univariate and multivariate normality, and multicollinearity among predictors; potential common method bias was also examined due to the use of single-source survey data. The measurement model was evaluated first through CFA by examining overall fit indices and standardized factor loadings, and measurement quality was documented through construct reliability and convergent validity evidence (e.g., composite reliability [CR] and average variance extracted [AVE]) before estimating the structural paths.

Ethical Considerations

The study complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), ensuring secure storage and responsible handling of research data. Academic integrity was upheld through adherence to APA 7th edition citation standards and the use of plagiarism detection tools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarizes teachers' descriptive ratings of trust in school leaders, empathy, management support, and relational transparency. Overall perceptions were uniformly high across constructs, with all variables interpreted as Very High. Teachers reported very high trust in

school leaders (M = 4.44, SD = .539), with particularly high ratings for benevolence and competence (both M = 4.56), as well as for predictability (M = 4.53) and integrity (M = 4.48). Empathy was likewise rated very highly (M = 4.49, SD = .556), with cognitive empathy (M = 4.56), emotional sensitivity (M = 4.56), and emotional contagion (M = 4.53) showing consistently elevated means. Management support also received very high ratings (M = 4.51, SD = .566), with communication and expertise emerging as the strongest dimensions (both M = 4.60). Relational transparency recorded the highest overall mean (M = 4.57, SD = .536), particularly in self-disclosure (M = 4.62) and mutual trust (M = 4.61). Across dimensions, relatively modest standard deviations indicate broad agreement among teachers.

Table 1. Descriptive Levels of Trust in Leader, Empathy of School Leaders, Management Support, and Relational Transparency

Variable / Dimension	SD	Mean	Descriptive Level
Trust in Leader	.539	4.44	Very High
Benevolence	.635	4.56	Very High
Integrity	.696	4.48	Very High
Predictability	.697	4.53	Very High
Competence	.630	4.56	Very High
Empathy of School Leaders	.556	4.49	Very High
Cognitive Empathy	.639	4.56	Very High
Emotional Contagion	.637	4.53	Very High
Emotional Sensitivity	.637	4.56	Very High
Management Support	.566	4.51	Very High
Provision of Resources	.664	4.54	Very High
Structural Arrangements	.644	4.57	Very High
Communication	.618	4.60	Very High
Expertise	.711	4.60	Very High
Power	.644	4.57	Very High
Relational Transparency	.536	4.57	Very High
Openness	.617	4.58	Very High
Truthfulness	.646	4.57	Very High
Self-Disclosure	.584	4.62	Very High
Mutual Trust	.609	4.61	Very High

Interpreted together, these descriptives suggest a leadership context characterized by strong relational and administrative functioning: teachers perceive leaders as credible and capable (trust), emotionally responsive (empathy), procedurally supportive (management support), and open in communication (relational transparency). This pattern is consistent with classic trust frameworks in schools, which conceptualize trust as benevolence, integrity, competence, and reliability (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). The very high empathy ratings also align with emotional intelligence perspectives that position empathy as a central leadership competence (Goleman, 2017), as well as school-based evidence linking empathic leadership to positive relational climates (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017). The strong management support ratings echo accounts of effective school leadership that emphasize communication, guidance, and supportive structures (Leithwood et al., 2020; Bush & Glover, 2016). Similarly, the high transparency ratings correspond with authentic leadership perspectives that treat openness and self-disclosure as core to credible leadership relationships (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2007). At the same time, uniformly very high means across constructs may reflect a generally favorable leadership climate in the sampled schools and reduce the likelihood that isolated strengths drive later findings in only one domain. Some prior work has reported lower or more variable levels of trust, empathy, support, or transparency across contexts (Balyer, 2017; Rockwood, 2009; Al-Omari & Hilal, 2022), suggesting that these perceptions can vary across contexts. In the present study, the descriptives provide a strong baseline for subsequent analyses by showing that the constructs are meaningfully endorsed and sufficiently stable for examining their interrelations and predicting teachers' trust in correlational, regression, and SEM models.

Table 2 reports the Pearson correlations among the study variables. Teachers' trust in school leaders was strongly and positively associated with empathy ($r = .818, p < .001$), management support ($r = .809, p < .001$), and relational transparency ($r = .781, p < .001$). The magnitude of these coefficients indicates that trust is closely aligned with both interpersonal leadership qualities and organizational support practices.

Table 2. Relationship Between Trust in Leader and Leadership Variables

Variables	r	p-value	Decision on Ho	Interpretation
Empathy of School Leaders	.818	.000	Reject	Significant
Management Support	.809	.000	Reject	Significant
Relational Transparency	.781	.000	Reject	Significant

Viewed together, the correlation pattern suggests that a single leadership feature does not drive teachers' trust but reflects a broader relational appraisal in which emotionally responsive leadership, transparent communication, and supportive managerial practices tend to co-occur. This interpretation aligns with evidence that empathic leadership strengthens relational quality and trust in school contexts (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017). It is also consistent with findings that cognitive and emotional empathy are linked to perceived leader trustworthiness (Kock et al., 2019) and with recent school-based evidence connecting interpersonal sensitivity to trust (Seçer et al., 2025). The strong association between management support and trust similarly fits prior work emphasizing that clear guidance and enabling structures contribute to favorable leadership evaluations (Leithwood et al., 2020; Bush & Glover, 2016), although the strength of this link can vary across contexts (Ahmed et al., 2016). Finally, the relationship between relational transparency and trust is consistent with foundational and contemporary evidence that openness and truthfulness promote trust judgments (Walumbwa et al., 2007; Masimane et al., 2022; Gardner et al., 2021). Theoretically, these correlations are compatible with frameworks that treat trust as emerging from reciprocal, fairness-based interactions and from credible, emotionally intelligent leadership conduct. Social Exchange Theory explains why relational cues and perceived goodwill are

central to trust formation (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Emotional Intelligence perspectives highlight empathy as a mechanism through which leaders build relational confidence (Goleman, 2017; Miao et al., 2017). Organizational Support perspectives further explain why perceived support from leaders and structures relates to trust (Eisenberger et al., 2016; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Authentic Leadership theory explains the trust relevance of transparency through openness and credibility signaling (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2021). Table 2 provides a clear empirical justification for modeling these leadership dimensions jointly: the strong correlations support their inclusion in subsequent SEM and indicate the need for SEM to determine unique contributions among closely related predictors.

Table 3 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis conducted to determine the direct and collective effects of school leaders' empathy, management support practices, and relational transparency on teachers' trust in school leaders. The overall regression model was statistically significant, with an F-ratio of 347.926 and a p-value of .000. The model yielded a multiple correlation coefficient of $R = .850$ and a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = .722$, indicating that 72.2% of the variance in teachers' trust in school leaders was explained by the combined influence of the three independent variables.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Trust in School Leaders

Predictor Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	.501	.125	—	4.008	.000
Empathy of School Leaders	.381	.054	.393	7.053	.000
Management Support	.270	.057	.283	4.761	.000
Relational Transparency	.221	.052	.220	4.243	.000

Model Summary

R	R ²	F-ratio	p-value
.850	.722	347.926	.000

All three predictors contributed uniquely and positively to trust. Empathy showed the strongest standardized effect ($\beta = .393$, $p < .001$), suggesting that teachers' trust is most sensitive to leaders' interpersonal responsiveness and emotional attunement. This result is consistent with evidence that empathic leader behaviors strengthen trust relationships in schools (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017; Kılıç & Yavuz, 2021; Seçer et al., 2025), while also acknowledging that contextual differences may influence how consistently empathy is experienced across settings (Rockwood, 2009). Management support also emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = .283$, $p < .001$), indicating that administrative guidance and enabling resources contribute meaningfully to teachers' trust judgments. Prior work similarly frames support practices as an important condition shaping leadership credibility, though the magnitude of this association can vary by context (Leithwood et al., 2020; Bush & Glover, 2016; Al-Omari & Hilal, 2022). Relational transparency demonstrated an additional positive contribution ($\beta = .220$, $p < .001$), reinforcing the role of open and honest leadership communication in trust formation (Walumbwa et al., 2007; Masimane et al., 2022; Gardner et al., 2021), with some evidence that transparency is not uniformly enacted across school environments (Rockwood, 2009). The regression results indicate that teachers' trust is best explained by a combination of relational and organizational leadership behaviors, rather than any single dimension in isolation. This integrated pattern aligns with arguments that trust in educational leadership is multidimensional and strengthened when interpersonal and structural leadership practices work together (Ivziku et al., 2023; Bhardwaj & Blackwell, 2025). Importantly, these regression findings provide a strong baseline for the SEM analysis by identifying the relative predictive strength of each leadership dimension before model refinement.

Table 4. Factor-Level Convergent Validity of the Measurement Model

Construct	Factor	Indicators (n)	Std. Loadings (λ) Range	CR	AVE	Convergent Validity
Trust in Leader	Factor 1	5	.76 – .84	.897	.634	Yes
	Factor 2	5	.74 – .80	.878	.590	Yes
	Factor 3	5	.80 – .85	.916	.686	Yes
	Factor 4	5	.72 – .79	.866	.563	Yes
Empathy of School Leaders	Factor 1	8	.71 – .78	.909	.556	Yes
	Factor 2	5	.78 – .82	.899	.640	Yes
	Factor 3	6	.73 – .78	.888	.570	Yes
Management Support	Factor 1	5	.76 – .81	.887	.612	Yes
	Factor 2	5	.72 – .77	.860	.551	Yes
	Factor 3	6	.80 – .85	.928	.681	Yes
	Factor 4	5	.74 – .78	.872	.578	Yes
Relational Transparency	Factor 5	5	.70 – .75	.845	.522	Yes
	Factor 1	4	.80 – .84	.890	.669	Yes
	Factor 2	4	.75 – .78	.850	.585	Yes
	Factor 3	4	.72 – .75	.825	.540	Yes
	Factor 4	4	.78 – .81	.873	.632	Yes

Construct validity was supported at the measurement level (Table 4). Across constructs, the CFA results showed substantial standardized loadings (Trust in Leader = .72–.85; Empathy of School Leaders = .71–.82; Management Support = .70–.85; Relational Transparency = .72–.84). Reliability and convergent validity were also adequate, with factor-level CR ranging from .845 to .928 and AVE from .522 to .686 (construct-level CR = .961–.974; AVE = .582–.618). These results are important because they confirm that the structural model is estimated on well-measured latent variables rather than weak indicators. They also reinforce that trust is multidimensional, reflected through benevolence, integrity, predictability, and competence. Ivziku et al. (2023) argue that trust in educational leadership is inherently multi-faceted

rather than a single global judgment. Seçer (2025) similarly shows that teachers evaluate trust along moral and professional dimensions, consistent with the way trust was represented in the present model.

Structural model selection (Table 5) identified Model 5 as the best-fitting and most parsimonious model. Model 5 achieved excellent fit across absolute and incremental indices, with CMIN/DF = 1.345 and a non-significant chi-square probability ($p = .074$). Incremental fit indices were exceptionally high (NFI = .992, TLI = .996, CFI = .998, GFI = .992). The approximate fit also indicated a close fit (RMSEA = .031), and the test of close fit was strongly supportive (PCLOSE = .927). Compared with the preceding models, Model 5 therefore offered the strongest overall evidence that the retained structural configuration adequately represents the relationships among the study constructs while maintaining explanatory economy.

Table 5. Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Competing Structural Models

Model	CMIN/DF	p-value	NFI	TLI	CFI	GFI	RMSEA	p-close
Criterion	< 5	> .05	> .95	> .95	> .95	> .95	< .05	> .05
Model 1	4.238	.000	.875	.891	.903	.884	.081	.000
Model 2	3.562	.012	.912	.927	.940	.915	.062	.041
Model 3	2.417	.067	.942	.954	.962	.947	.048	.138
Model 4	1.978	.089	.962	.971	.981	.963	.036	.294
Model 5 (Best Fit)	1.345	.074	.992	.996	.998	.992	.031	

Within the retained structure (Figure 1), empathy and relational transparency had significant direct effects on teachers' trust in school leaders, indicating that relational leadership behaviors most proximally shape trust. Berkovich (2017) explains that teachers' trust judgments are strongly influenced by whether leaders demonstrate sensitivity to teachers' emotions and professional concerns. Kılıç and Yavuz (2021) further show that empathic behaviors promote trust because they signal care and respect in ways teachers perceive as personally meaningful. Relational transparency appears to work through a complementary mechanism. Masimane et al. (2022) report that transparent and relationally authentic leadership behaviors strengthen trust by reducing uncertainty and increasing perceived leader sincerity. In combination, these perspectives align with the structural finding that relational qualities, rather than administrative supports alone, constitute the most direct trust-building mechanisms in the final SEM.

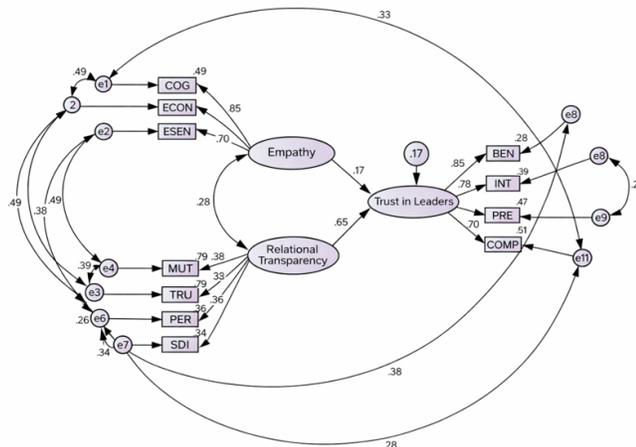


Figure 1. Best Fit Model on Trust in School Leaders

Legend:
 TRU_LEA = Trust in Leaders;
 BEN = Benevolence;
 INT = Integrity;
 PRE = Predictability;
 COMP = Competence;
 EMP = Empathy;
 COG = Cognitive Empathy;
 ECON = Empathic Concern;
 ESEN = Emotional Sensitivity;
 SDI = Self-Disclosure;
 REL_TRA = Relational Transparency;
 MUT = Mutuality;
 TRU = Truthfulness;
 OPN = Openness;

The SEM analysis was very helpful in figuring out why Management Support was left out of Model 5, even though it had a big impact in the first regression model ($\beta = .283, p < .001$; Table 3). In regression analysis, direct relationships between observed or composite variables were predicted. SEM, on the other hand, looks at relationships between latent constructs while taking measurement error and shared variance among predictors into account. These differences in how the data are collected mean that variables that are important in regression may not be as useful for making predictions when they are modeled together with potentially similar constructs in SEM. In studies on educational leadership, management practices are usually thought of as structural factors that help an organization work, rather than direct causes of relational outcomes. For instance, Leithwood et al. (2020) say that manager support is a condition that makes it possible for leadership interactions to happen. Bush (2016) also says that administrative help is not enough to keep teachers' trust unless it is paired with leadership behaviors that teachers see as trustworthy and polite. According to Al-Omari (2022), the connection between support and trust may be different in different institutional settings. This means that support may not have as much of an effect directly once social leadership processes are more clearly modeled. According to these points of view, Model 5's results show that management support is still important. However, it may have an indirect effect on teachers' trust or overlap with relationship predictors that show how trust is built more directly.

There is also theoretical coherence in the finished model. Based on the Social Exchange Theory, Cropanzano (2017) says that trust grows through two-way interactions that are fair, friendly, and respectful of each other. These qualities are highly communicated through empathic engagement. Research on emotional intelligence also shows that leaders who can understand and react to their followers' feelings affect how

much care and respect they feel, both of which are important for building trust (Miao et al., 2017). The Authentic Leadership Theory also talks about how relational transparency helps build trust by being open, honest, and consistent in how a leader interacts with a following (Gardner et al., 2021). These different theories back up the way Model 5 is interpreted: teachers' trust in school leaders seems to grow mainly through relational signs that show empathy, authenticity, and credibility. When these relational pathways are shown clearly in the structural model, managerial support does not make as much of a difference in this context. Future studies should build on this model by looking into possible indirect or mediating pathways that could explain why management support did not show up as a direct predictor in the final SEM but did have a strong effect on regression. Management support affects trust implicitly by making relational leadership behaviors easier, like communicating openly and empathically. For example, leaders can focus more on their interactions with teachers if their workplace is helpful. This strengthens the relationships that build trust in the long run. By using bootstrapped indirect-effect analyses and nested model comparisons to test these mechanisms, we can find out if management support is mainly an enabling or contextual factor that improves relational leadership practices. This would give us a fuller picture of how trust grows in school organizations.

What This Means for Policy and Practice

According to the SEM results, teachers' confidence is directly increased through empathy and relational transparency. This means that these skills should be given more attention in leadership training, professional development, and evaluation systems. Leaders in schools should get help building empathy-based leadership skills like being aware of their own emotions, actively listening, and responding quickly to teachers' concerns. Research by Berkovich (2017) shows that more empathic leaders are better able to build trusting relationships with teachers by being more aware of their professional needs and experiences. On the other hand, leaders should make relational transparency a permanent part of their work by communicating clearly, giving information at the right time, recognizing the limits of the organization, and keeping their promises. According to Masimane et al. (2022), this kind of openness and honesty makes people feel more authentic, which makes the bond between a leader and a teacher stronger. In addition to traditional management skills, relational and emotional leadership skills should be clearly included in leadership competency frameworks and evaluation methods at the policy level. According to Kılıç and Yavuz (2021), policies that recognize these skills are more in line with what teachers expect from leaders they can trust. Management support was not kept as a direct predictor in the final SEM, but the fact that it was important in the regression analysis earlier shows that it is still a key condition for success. Trust is more likely to grow when managers back it through transparent and caring leadership. In line with this idea, Leithwood et al. (2020) stress that strong relational leadership behaviors that build trust, teamwork, and mutual respect within school communities work best when combined with management support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Using structural equation modeling in public junior high schools, this study identified a parsimonious, best-fitting model in which empathy and relational transparency emerged as the strongest direct predictors of teachers' trust in school leaders, indicating that relational leadership practices primarily drive trust. This study advances understanding of trust in educational leadership by demonstrating, through SEM, that leadership variables do not exert equal influence when modeled simultaneously. That trust is more strongly explained by leaders' emotional sensitivity and authentic engagement than by managerial support alone. Moreover, leadership development and school governance initiatives should prioritize relational competencies, particularly empathy and transparent communication, as central targets for strengthening teacher trust and improving leader–teacher relationships in school settings. Furthermore, future studies may test the model in other educational levels and regions, examine potential indirect pathways, and use longitudinal designs to strengthen causal interpretation and assess the stability of the relationships over time.

In light of the findings, it is recommended that educational leaders and policymakers intentionally strengthen empathy and relational transparency as core components of school leadership practice. Leadership preparation, training, and professional development programs should explicitly focus on relational competencies such as emotional awareness, authentic communication, and transparent decision-making to foster trust between school leaders and teachers. At the policy level, these relational qualities may be integrated into leadership standards, selection criteria, and performance evaluation systems to institutionalize trust-building practices. These recommendations directly support Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by promoting effective, inclusive, and supportive school leadership that enhances the educational environment. They also align with Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by contributing to transparent, accountable, and trustworthy leadership within educational institutions. Future studies are recommended to test the proposed model across other regions and educational levels to strengthen further evidence-based leadership policies that advance these global development goals.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to express her gratitude for granting permission to conduct the study. Appreciation is also extended to the individuals who provided valuable guidance, effort, and assistance in achieving the study's objectives.

Conflicting Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest in the preparation and publication of this research.

Funding

The author funded this study.

Contribution

The author contributed to the overall conduct and writing of the study.

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