

School Leader Personal Traits and Teacher Work Engagement: Leadership Styles and Instructional Leadership as Mediators

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ABSTRACT

A growing number of teachers are demotivated and disengaged from their work. This leads to increasing numbers of teachers facing debilitating physical and psychological symptoms such as stress, depression and burnout. Many of them opt to quit prematurely in the form of early retirement. The present study sought to test a hypothesized model of how the personal characteristics of school leaders are related to teacher work engagement through leadership styles and instructional leadership. Data were collected from 198 deputy headteachers and teachers attending a leadership course at the Aminuddin Baki Institute, Genting Highlands, Malaysia. A self-developed instrument based on the survey of literature was used and its validity and reliability assessed. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using Smart PLS software. Results indicated that the measurement instruments enjoyed a high degree of validity and reliability. The proposed structural model of the relationship between school leader personal characteristics and teacher work engagement adequately fit the data. It was found that the direct relationship between school leader personal characteristics and teacher work engagement was not significant. On the other hand, the indirect relationship between school leader personal characteristics and teacher work engagement was significant. Mediation analysis confirmed leadership styles and instructional leadership mediate the relationship between school leader personal characteristics and teacher work engagement. These results are important for the appointment, training, supervision and monitoring of school leaders in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, there has been recently a shocking increase in the number of teachers who choose to prematurely quit the teaching profession and opt for early retirement (Sinar Harian, 6 April 2023; Kosmo Digital, 14 April 2023; Berita Harian, 27 June 2023; Astroawani, 13 June 2023; Buletin TV3, 17 June 2023; Malaysia Dateline, 19 April 2023). Various factors have been identified that influenced teachers not only in Malaysia but globally, to resign or opt for early retirement. Some of these reasons include: Workload: Teachers often cite an overwhelming workload, with long hours spent on lesson planning, marking, administrative tasks, and handling extracurricular activities (Ingersoll, R. M., 2003). Stress and Burnout: Continuous interaction with students, parents, and administrators can be mentally and emotionally taxing. High expectations, especially during national examinations in Malaysia like the SPM, can place additional stress on teachers (Kyriacou, C., 2001; Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S., 2017). Inadequate Compensation: In many places, including Malaysia, teachers feel they are not adequately compensated for the amount of work and effort they put into their profession (Allegretto, S. A., & Mishel, L., 2016). Lack of Professional Development: A lack of opportunities for growth and professional development can stifle a teacher's progression in their career (Desimone, L. M., Porter, A. C., Garet, M. S., Yoon, K. S., & Birman, B. F., 2002).

Changes in Education Policy: With changing governments and administrative decisions, there might be changes in education policy that not all educators agree with or find effective for students (Ball, S. J., 2012). Safety Concerns: Globally, there have been concerns about safety in schools. While this might not be a primary concern in Malaysia, it's worth noting that issues like bullying or other forms of harassment can be a factor (Astor, R. A., Meyer, H. A., & Behre, W. J., 1999). Health Concerns: The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a significant shift in the education sector, with many teachers having to adapt to online teaching quickly. Concerns about health and the challenges of adapting to new teaching methods may have caused some to rethink their positions (Kim, L. E., & Asbury, K., 2020). Seeking Better Opportunities: Some teachers resign to look for better opportunities either within the educational sector in different roles or entirely outside the sector (Guarino, C. M., Santibañez, L., & Daley, G. A., 2006).

Importance of Work Engagement for Teachers

Work engagement has been identified as a crucial factor in employee retention across various professions, including teaching. Work engagement can be defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. A lack of this engagement often correlates with negative outcomes, including the intention to leave one's job. Let's delve into the literature on this topic, particularly in the context of teachers.

Researchers defining work engagement normally contrast it with burnout, highlighting its significance in the context of work-related well-being (Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). For teachers, their sense of relatedness with students is a key aspect of their basic psychological needs and overall engagement (Klassen, R. M., Perry, N. E., & Frenzel, A. C. (2012). In this sense, engagement is so crucial for teachers that teachers who felt more engaged were more proactive and performed better (Bakker, A. B., & Bal, M. P., 2010). There is evidence that emotional exhaustion (which can be seen as the opposite of engagement) plays a role in teachers' intentions to leave the profession (Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S., 2011).

Many factors have been identified to impact the work engagement of teachers. Research emphasizes the importance of a positive school climate and social-emotional learning in influencing teacher stress and job satisfaction, both of which are closely related to work engagement (Collie, R. J., Shapka, J. D., & Perry, N. E., 2012). Other researchers have emphasized that the school working environment, shaped significantly by the school leader's personality and actions, plays a pivotal role in teachers' decisions to stay or leave. Lack of supportive leadership is a primary driver of teacher attrition (Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L., 2017). Moreover, positive emotions and self-efficacy can enhance work engagement among teachers (Burić, I., & Macuka, I., 2018). Albrecht (2012) studied potential interventions at various organizational levels that can bolster employee engagement and well-being, key among them being leaders' personal characteristics and management practices.

School Leadership & Work Engagement Among Teachers

The influence of school leadership on teachers' work engagement cannot be overstated. Leadership styles and personal characteristics of school leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the school environment, directly impacting teachers' motivation, job satisfaction, and overall work engagement. This, in turn, affects the teacher's intention to stay or leave the profession. Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiration, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation, has been positively associated with teacher motivation and commitment. Leaders practicing this style foster a collaborative culture, empowering teachers and thereby enhancing work engagement (Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2006).

One of the most studied leadership practices that are strongly connected with teacher outcomes is instructional leadership. Instructional leaders focus on improving teaching practices and student outcomes. Their emphasis on professional growth and development aligns with teachers' intrinsic motivation, leading to increased engagement and reduced burnout (Robinson, V. M., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J., 2008). Effective instructional

leadership required a high degree of emotional intelligence. A leader's emotional intelligence, which encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, plays a significant role in fostering healthy work relationships. Strong interpersonal relationships and trust between leadership and faculty can augment work engagement and job satisfaction among teachers (Leithwood, K. A., 2005). In contrast, laissez-faire leaders do create a lot of stress for teachers. Contrarily, laissez-faire leadership, characterized by a lack of intervention or direction, can be detrimental. In the absence of clear direction and support, teachers often feel isolated and unsupported, leading to decreased work engagement and increased intentions to leave the profession (Bogler, R., 2001).

Teachers' intention to leave the teaching profession is mostly related to leadership. Researchers have found that school conditions and the nature of leadership significantly influence teachers' decisions to stay or move. Inefficient leadership, lacking vision and support, can result in reduced teacher commitment, decreased work engagement, and increased turnover (Boyd, D., Grossman, P., Ing, M., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J., 2011). One aspect of leadership that is often overlooked is feedback and recognition. Regular feedback and recognition from school leadership are linked to increased teacher self-efficacy and engagement. Leaders who provide constructive feedback while recognizing teachers' efforts foster a positive work environment conducive to professional growth (Hattie, J. (2009).

The foregoing demonstrates the importance of effective school leadership in fostering work engagement among teachers. Leadership styles, like transformational and instructional leadership, which focus on collaboration, professional growth, and relationship-building, can enhance teacher commitment and satisfaction. On the other hand, laissez-faire leadership or leadership devoid of emotional intelligence can lead to feelings of isolation and decreased engagement, augmenting the likelihood of teachers leaving the profession. Ensuring that school leaders are equipped with the right leadership skills and characteristics is therefore crucial for retaining committed and engaged teachers.

School Leaders' Personalities in Teachers' Work Engagement

School leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the teaching and learning environment. While their management styles are crucial, their personalities, which drive these leadership behaviors, are of equal significance. There has been considerable research focusing on how the personalities of school leaders influence teachers' work engagement and their retention within the profession. Researchers have concentrated on the role of the Big Five personality traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—in determining effective leadership. Of these, conscientiousness and openness were positively associated with transformational leadership, which in turn positively impacts teacher engagement.

To begin with, it has been found that extraverted leaders are typically outgoing, making them more approachable. Their proactive communication can make teachers feel more connected and engaged. Extraverted personalities, due to their proactive nature, can influence job crafting behavior, potentially leading to greater work engagement among subordinates, including teachers (Bipp, T., & Demerouti, E., 2015). On the other hand, leaders high in neuroticism might find it challenging to handle school stressors effectively. Their potential emotional instability can trickle down, affecting teachers' morale and engagement (Rosete, D., & Ciarrochi, J., 2005). Other researchers have found that leaders scoring high in neuroticism often showcase reduced leadership effectiveness, which might lead to decreased teacher work engagement (Rosete, D., & Ciarrochi, J. (2005).

Regarding the trait of agreeableness, it has been found that leaders with high agreeableness tend to foster trust and collaboration. Their empathetic and cooperative nature can contribute to a cohesive and engaged teaching team. Agreeable leaders can have a positive effect on team processes, which translates to higher work engagement among team members, including teachers (Barrick, M. R., Stewart, G. L., Neubert, M. J., & Mount, M. K., 1998).

Management Styles and Teacher Work Engagement

The impact of school leaders' management styles and practices on teachers' work engagement and intentions to remain in the profession has been a focal point in educational research. Several management styles and practices influence teacher morale, job satisfaction, and work engagement. First of all, Transformational leaders inspire and motivate by creating a shared vision. Teachers under such leadership often report increased work engagement and job satisfaction due to the collaborative and inspiring environment cultivated by these leaders (Leithwood, K., & Sun, J., 2012). Transactional leaders operate mainly through rewards and penalties. While this style might ensure compliance, it doesn't foster intrinsic motivation. Consequently, teachers under transactional leadership might feel less engaged and more inclined to consider leaving (Bogler, R., 2001). Among the worst are Laissez-Faire leaders. Laissez-faire leaders provide minimal guidance, which can lead to ambiguity in roles and expectations. This lack of direction often results in decreased work engagement and a heightened intention among teachers to leave (Aydin, A., Sarier, Y., & Uysal, S., 2013).

In contrast, leaders who adopt a participative style involve teachers in decision-making processes. Such inclusivity can enhance teachers' sense of ownership and belonging, thus promoting work engagement (Somech, A., 2010). Related to this is authentic leadership, which is closely tied to a leader's genuine personality and self-awareness, has been linked to positive organizational outcomes, including increased work engagement among followers (Walumbwa, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J., 2008). Related to this is transformational leadership. When leaders inspire and challenge, teachers often report heightened work engagement and a reduced inclination to depart (Alonderiene, R., & Majauskaite, M., 2016). In the same vein is servant leadership which characterized by focusing on the growth and well-being of community members, has a positive influence on employee behaviors. Such leadership can significantly improve work engagement among teachers, promoting a sense of belonging and decreasing turnover intentions Sun, P. Y., & Wang, Y. (2017).

Recently, there has been emphasis on ethical leadership styles, marked by fairness, integrity, and genuine concern for employees, can foster innovative behavior in teachers. This often translates to higher engagement levels and reduced turnover intentions (Tian, Q., & Sanchez, J. I., 2017). Another related style is distributed leadership which promotes a collaborative environment by sharing decision-making roles. Such practices significantly increase trust in the leader, fostering an empowered teaching community that is less likely to experience turnover (Hulpia, H., Devos, G., & Van Keer, H. (2018).

School leaders who prioritize and facilitate continuous professional development opportunities often witness elevated levels of work engagement among teachers. Such opportunities enhance teacher efficacy and job satisfaction (Louis, K. S., Dretzke, B., & Wahlstrom, K., 2010). A supportive principal is a key factor in reducing teacher burnout and enhancing well-being. Given the high-stress nature of teaching, a leader's support can directly influence a teacher's desire to remain in the profession (Gray, C., Wilcox, G., & Nordstokke, D., 2017). This is especially true in a culture characterised by regular, constructive feedback from leaders. This enhances teacher engagement and commitment to the institution (Han, J., Yin, H., & Wang, W., 2016). Negative interactions with school leaders, or a perceived unsupportive organizational climate, can be a significant factor in teachers' intentions to leave. Positive interactions, conversely, have the opposite effect (Price, H. E. (2012).

The above literature reveals a strong correlation between the management styles and practices of school leaders and teachers' work engagement. Styles that prioritize inspiration, collaboration, feedback, and professional growth foster higher engagement levels. In contrast, styles marked by lack of direction, minimal support, or mere transactional interactions can diminish engagement and intensify teachers' intentions to leave the profession. Progressive leadership styles such as servant, ethical, and distributed leadership not only bolster teacher morale and job satisfaction but also act as significant deterrents to professional burnout and turnover intentions. To foster a thriving educational environment, school leaders must stay updated with evolving leadership paradigms and practices that promote teacher engagement and retention. It is therefore imperative

for school leaders to understand and adopt management practices that positively influence teacher engagement and retention.

Instructional Leadership and Teacher Work Engagement

Instructional leadership focuses on enhancing educational outcomes by improving the quality of instruction and the learning environment. The practices of instructional leaders directly influence teachers' work engagement and their intentions to either remain in or leave the profession. When principals prioritize instructional quality and offer professional growth opportunities, teachers are more engaged. A supportive environment for development and learning is crucial for fostering teacher commitment (Sebastian, J., & Allensworth, E., 2020). Effective instructional leadership includes giving regular, constructive feedback on teaching practices. Teachers, when receiving actionable feedback, report heightened work engagement, feeling valued, and supported in their instructional roles (Grissom, J. A., Loeb, S., & Master, B., 2013).

Among good instructional leadership practices is involving teachers in creating and sustaining a shared vision for student achievement foster a sense of collective responsibility (Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H., 2019). This shared vision reduces feelings of isolation among teachers, subsequently decreasing intentions to leave. This also related to involvement in coordinating the curriculum and ensuring instructional quality (Robinson, V. M., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J., 2008). When teachers feel they have clear guidance and the resources needed to teach effectively, they are less likely to experience burnout or consider leaving the profession. For this to work, leader need to prioritize data-driven decision-making ensure that teaching practices are aligned with student needs (Schildkamp, K., & Kuiper, W., 2010). Teachers who use data effectively, with the support of their leaders, often feel more competent and engaged in their roles.

The above practices require leaders to promote a collaborative culture where teachers learn from one another (Printy, S. M., 2008). When teachers feel part of a supportive community, they experience higher job satisfaction and are less likely to seek opportunities elsewhere. A collaborative culture includes supporting teachers to fulfil their responsibilities. While high-performance expectations can lead to improved student outcomes, they might also contribute to teacher stress if not coupled with adequate support (Wong, K. C., & Nicotera, A., 2003). Striking the right balance is crucial to prevent burnout and reduce turnover intentions. One of the ways the leader can support teachers is modelling the behaviours expected of them. School leaders who model best practices in teaching and learning directly impact teacher motivation. When leaders are actively involved and showcase effective teaching methods, it not only motivates but also provides teachers with a clear direction, enhancing their engagement (Day, C., Gu, Q., & Sammons, P., 2016).

Effective instructional leadership also includes good communication, monitoring and feedback, and providing opportunities for continuous professional development. Establishing trust through open communication channels ensures that teachers feel safe to voice concerns, share ideas, and seek guidance (Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2015). Instructional leaders who foster a transparent and trusting environment bolster teacher morale and engagement. They practice strategic allocation of resources, ensuring that teachers have what they need to be successful (Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Strauss, T., 2017). Leaders who prioritize and streamline resources towards improving instruction tend to have a more engaged and committed teaching staff. Moreover, involving teachers in decision-making processes around instruction and curriculum development fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility (Eyal, O., & Roth, G., 2011). This shared decision-making not only enhances teacher engagement but also strengthens their commitment to the school's vision.

Instructional leadership also involves monitoring and supervising teachers on a regular basis. While monitoring and evaluation are essential, it's the manner in which they are conducted that matters. Constructive evaluations that focus on teacher growth, rather than punitive measures, can significantly boost teacher morale and reduce turnover intentions (Grissom, J. A., Blissett, R. S. L., & Mitani, H., 2018). When teachers are found wanting in some aspects, instructional leaders that offer personalized professional development based on individual teacher needs ensure that teachers feel valued and understood (Desimone, L. M., & Pak, K., 2017). This personal touch can dramatically increase engagement, as teachers feel their unique challenges and strengths are recognized and addressed.

To reiterate, instructional leadership extends beyond curriculum and teaching strategies; it encompasses the holistic approach leaders adopt in supporting, guiding, and working alongside their teaching staff. The literature consistently indicates that school leaders who prioritize instructional leadership practices that foster trust, collaboration, professional growth, and shared vision are more likely to have engaged and committed teachers. On the flip side, a lack of such practices can lead to diminished teacher engagement, potentially increasing their intentions to leave the profession.

In conclusion, the instructional leadership practices of school leaders play a pivotal role in shaping teachers' work engagement. Prioritizing professional growth, fostering a shared vision, and creating a supportive instructional environment are among the practices that enhance teacher engagement. However, it's also vital to balance performance expectations with appropriate support to ensure teachers remain committed and don't experience burnout, leading to turnover. Effective instructional leadership, therefore, not only improves educational outcomes but also plays a significant role in teacher retention.

The Mediating Role of Instructional Leadership Practices

From the foregoing discussion, instructional leadership practices have emerged as pivotal to understanding how the personal characteristics of school leaders can influence teacher work engagement and intention to leave the profession. School leaders with high emotional intelligence (EI) tend to adopt instructional leadership practices that are more supportive and empathetic. This fosters a positive teaching environment, enhancing teacher work engagement (Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., & Salovey, P., 2011). We have seen that transformational school leaders, through their intrinsic motivation and charisma, often prioritize instructional practices that drive teacher growth. These practices mediate the relationship between leaders' transformational characteristics and reduced teacher turnover intentions (Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D., 2008).

Leaders who exhibit high openness often embrace innovative curricular changes. Their instructional leadership is directed toward implementing and supporting these innovations, which in turn can bolster teacher engagement (Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E., 2006). Moreover, school leaders with high resilience adopt instructional leadership practices that prioritize coping mechanisms and stress-relief for teachers, mediating the relationship between leaders' resilience and teacher work engagement (Patterson, J. L., Goens, G. A., & Reed, D. S., 2016). The same applies to self-efficacy. Leaders with high self-efficacy often feel confident in supporting teachers instructionally. This confidence translates into more hands-on support for teachers, mediating the relationship between leader self-efficacy and teacher morale (Bandura, A., 2012). Confident leaders are more likely create positive collaborative environments. A study by Day, Gu, & Sammons (2016) found that the quality of interpersonal relationships established by school leaders directly influences the nature of collaborative environments in schools. A more collaborative environment, resulting from leaders' strong interpersonal skills, can foster teacher engagement and reduce turnover.

The above studies highlight the mediating role of instructional leadership practices in linking school leaders' personal characteristics to teacher work engagement and intention to leave. Personal traits such as emotional intelligence, resilience, openness to experience, and self-efficacy in leaders translate to specific instructional practices. These practices, in turn, significantly influence teacher morale, engagement, and retention decisions. From reflecting on their methods to emphasizing teacher well-being, the ways in which leaders interpret and act on their personal characteristics have profound implications for teacher work engagement and their long-term commitment to the profession. As such, understanding these mediating mechanisms becomes paramount for educational institutions aiming to enhance teacher work experiences and reduce turnover.

Problem Statement

The Malaysian education sector is experiencing an alarming rise in early teacher retirements and resignations, a trend mirrored globally (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Hussin et al., 2021). This is largely attributed to factors such as excessive workloads, stress, insufficient remuneration, limited opportunities for professional growth, frequent shifts in educational policies, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mokhtar et al.,

2020; Tajuddin et al., 2022). The outcome is a growing incidence of teacher burnout, declining morale, and a diminishing pool of experienced educators, ultimately jeopardizing student achievement and the sustainability of educational reforms (Ng & Sani, 2020; Kremer et al., 2021). While existing research underscores the importance of teacher work engagement in fostering retention, satisfaction, and performance (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018), the precise mechanisms through which school leaders influence this engagement remain unclear. Although leadership styles and instructional leadership have been identified as important factors (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020), few empirical studies in Malaysia have examined how the personal traits of school leaders interact with these leadership practices to shape teacher work engagement. This study aims to address this gap by testing whether leadership styles and instructional leadership mediate the relationship between school leaders' personal traits and teacher work engagement in Malaysian schools.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the direct relationships between school leaders' personal characteristics, their management styles and practices, instructional leadership, and teacher work engagement.
2. To investigate the mediating role of instructional leadership in the relationship between school leaders' management styles and practices and teacher work engagement, as well as in the relationship between school leaders' personal characteristics and teacher work engagement.
3. To explore the sequential mediating effects of management styles and practices and instructional leadership in the relationship between school leaders' personal characteristics and teacher work engagement.

Research hypotheses:

H1: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement (PER -> WE)

H2: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related with their management styles and practices (PER -> MS)

H3: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related with their Instructional Leadership (PER -> IL)

H4: Instructional leadership is positively related with teacher work engagement (IL -> WE)

H5: Management styles and practices of school leaders are positively related with their Instructional Leadership (MS -> IL)

H6: Management styles and practices of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement (MS -> WE)

H7a: Management styles and practices of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement through Instructional leadership (MS -> IL -> WE)

H7b: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement through management styles and practices (PER -> MS -> WE)

H7c: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to instructional leadership through management styles and practices (PER -> MS -> IL)

H7d: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement through management styles and practices and instructional leadership (PER -> MS -> IL -> WE)

H7e: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement through instructional leadership (PER -> IL -> WE)

These are represented in Figure 1 below.

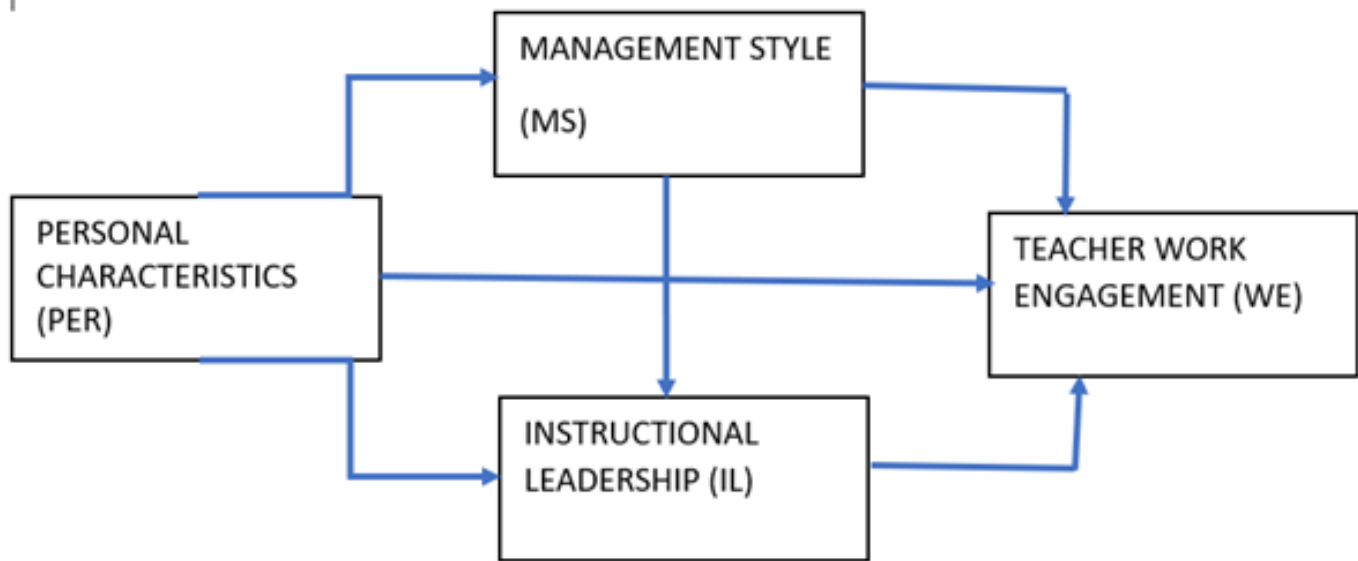


Figure 1: Proposed model

METHODOLOGY

The population for the study consisted of 198 deputy headteachers and teachers attending a leadership course at the Aminuddin Baki Institute, Genting Highlands, Malaysia. An online survey was employed which was answered by all of the participants, resulting in the response rate of 100. The data was collected from July 2023 to the end of August 2023. A rating scale with anchors from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” was used for the study. All dimensions in the study were measured using a self-developed instrument based on the survey of literature. In the final version of the instrument used in the present study, MS was measured by three items, PER by six items, WE by nine items, and IL by six items. Details of the validity and reliability of the instrument and its psychometric properties are discussed below. Data were analyzed using SmartPLS version no. 4 (Ringle, Wende, S., and Becker, 2022).

RESULTS

This section presents results of the statistical analysis starting with measurement model analysis which discusses the validity and reliability of the instrument and its suitability for being used in the present study. This is followed by the analysis of the structural model and hypothesis testing. Finally, results of the mediation analysis are presented.

Reliability and validity analysis

The measurement model was assessed to establish the reliability and validity of the constructs (Table 1). First, the factor loadings of all the items in the model have a value greater than the minimum acceptable value of 0.50 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Although factor loading over 0.7 is desirable (Vinzi, Chin, Henseler, & Wang, 2010), researchers frequently obtain weaker outer loadings (<0.70) in social science studies. Rather than automatically eliminating indicators, the effects of the removal of the item on composite reliability, content, and convergent validity were examined. Generally, items with outer loadings from 0.40 to 0.70 should be considered for removal only if deletion results in an increase of composite reliability or average variance extracted (AVE) over the recommended value (Hair et al., 2016). Since none of the outer loadings was below 0.70 no item was removed in the present study.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, rhoA, and composite reliability. Results for both were greater than the recommended value of 0.700 (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). As recommended, the rhoA value was between the values for Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (Sarstedt et al., 2017), it was also found to be over 0.70, hence, indicating good reliability (Henseler, Hubona, & Ray, 2016). Convergent validity was acceptable because the AVE for all of the constructs was higher than the recommended threshold of 0.50.

Table 1 Validity and reliability of the constructs

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Cronbach	rhoA	CR	AVE
Personality	PER2	0.908	0.954	0.954	0.963	0.813
	PER3	0.913				
	PER4	0.919				
	PER5	0.899				
	PER6	0.886				
	PER7	0.883				
Management	MP1	0.892	0.905	0.907	0.941	0.841
	MS2	0.931				
	MS4	0.928				
Instructional Management	IL1	0.871	0.941	0.944	0.953	0.772
	IL2	0.892				
	IL3	0.886				
	IL4	0.889				
	IL5	0.876				
	IL6	0.858				
Work Engagement	WE1	0.839	0.943	0.947	0.953	0.718
	WE2	0.887				
	WE3	0.847				
	WE4	0.861				
	WE5	0.888				
	WE6	0.876				
	WE7	0.858				
	WE9	0.707				

Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the correlations among the latent variables with the square root of AVE (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015), with values below the (conservative) threshold of 0.85. Hence, discriminant validity was established (see Table 2). Moreover, an examination of cross-loadings shows that the loadings for items representing each construct were clearly distinct (Table 3).

Table 2. Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio & Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

	IL	MS	PER	WE
IL	0.879	0.694	0.756	0.551
MS	0.647	0.917	0.833	0.618
PER	0.721	0.776	0.901	0.550
WE	0.525	0.572	0.524	0.857

Table 3. Cross Loadings

	IL	MS	PER	WE
IL1	0.871	0.483	0.563	0.420
IL2	0.892	0.573	0.622	0.471
IL3	0.886	0.622	0.651	0.488
IL4	0.889	0.512	0.588	0.439
IL5	0.876	0.649	0.688	0.467
IL6	0.858	0.547	0.672	0.474
MP1	0.574	0.892	0.680	0.557
MS2	0.566	0.931	0.698	0.488
MS4	0.636	0.928	0.754	0.527
PER2	0.627	0.688	0.908	0.458
PER3	0.623	0.767	0.913	0.465
PER4	0.602	0.668	0.919	0.455
PER5	0.642	0.738	0.899	0.508
PER6	0.723	0.672	0.886	0.514
PER7	0.678	0.659	0.883	0.430
WE1	0.482	0.446	0.425	0.839
WE2	0.511	0.494	0.463	0.887
WE3	0.413	0.488	0.427	0.847
WE4	0.371	0.482	0.413	0.861
WE5	0.432	0.460	0.431	0.888
WE6	0.499	0.519	0.496	0.876
WE7	0.487	0.531	0.487	0.858
WE9	0.330	0.446	0.395	0.707

Structural model

The structural model reflects the paths hypothesized in the research framework. A structural model is assessed based on the significance of paths (Figure 2.). The results show that there is significance in the prediction of most of the constructs (see Table 4). Furthermore, the model fit was assessed using standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). The value of standardized root mean square residual was 0.052; this is clearly less than the threshold value of 0.10 (Hair et al., 2016).

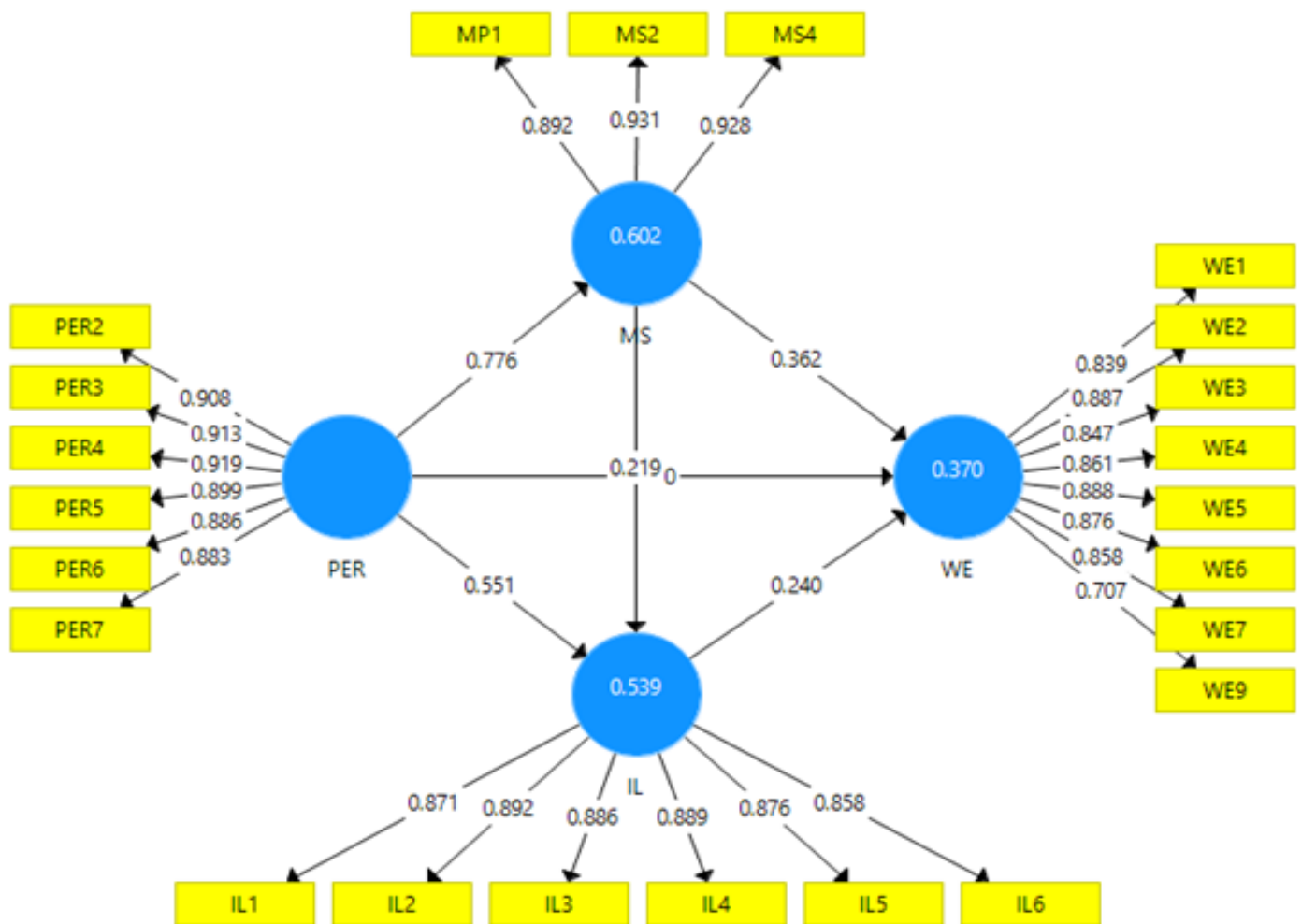


Figure 2. Structural model with path coefficients

Note(s): PER = Leader Personal Characteristics, MS = Leader Management style & practices, IL = Leader Instructional Leadership, WE = Teacher Work Engagement

In further assessment of the goodness of fit, hypotheses were tested to ascertain the significance of the relationship. The following hypotheses regarding direct effects were suggested for this study: H1: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement (PER → WE); H2: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related with their management styles and practices (PER → MS); H3: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related with their Instructional Leadership (PER → IL); H4: Instructional leadership is positively related with teacher work engagement (IL → WE); H5: Management styles and practices of school leaders are positively related with their Instructional Leadership (MS → IL); and H6: Management styles and practices of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement (MS → WE).

H1 evaluated whether the personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement. The results revealed that the direct impact of PER on WE was insignificant ($\beta = .070$, $t = 0.608$, $p = .543$). Hence, H1 was not supported.

The results revealed that PER had a significant impact on MS ($\beta = .776$, $t = 14.996$, $p < .001$) and IL ($\beta = .552$, $t = 4.337$, $p < .001$). The results also revealed significant impacts of IL on WE ($\beta = .240$, $t = 2.275$, $p = .001$), and MS on WE ($\beta = .0363$, $t = 3.517$, $p = .001$) supporting H2, H3, H4, and H6. The impact of MS on IL was not significant ($\beta = .0218$, $t = 1.642$, $p < .001$). Hence H5 was not supported

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing

	Path coefficient	Standard Deviation	T statistics	p values
IL -> WE	0.240	0.105	2.275	0.023
MS -> IL	0.218	0.133	1.642	0.101
MS -> WE	0.363	0.103	3.517	0.000
PER -> IL	0.552	0.127	4.337	0.000
PER -> MS	0.776	0.052	14.996	0.000
PER -> WE	0.070	0.115	0.608	0.543

Mediation analysis

Mediation analysis was performed to assess the mediating role Leader Management style & practices and Leader Instructional Leadership (MS and IL) on the relationship between the personal characteristics of school leaders teacher work engagement. The following hypotheses were proposed for the mediating roles of the different constructs: H7a: Management styles and practices of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement through Instructional leadership (MS -> IL -> WE); H7b: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement through management styles and practices (PER -> MS -> WE); H7c: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to instructional leadership through management styles and practices (PER -> MS -> IL); H7d: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement through management styles and practices and instructional leadership (PER -> MS -> IL -> WE); and H7e: Personal characteristics of school leaders are positively related to teacher work engagement through instructional leadership (PER -> IL -> WE).

The results (see Table 4) revealed partially significant ($p < .10$) mediating roles of IL (H7e: $\beta = 0.132$, $t = 1.842$, $p = .066$) and significant mediating roles of MS (H7b: $\beta = 0.281$, $t = 3.494$, $p = .001$). IL (H7a: $\beta = .052$, $t = 0.357$, $p = .175$) did not mediate the relationship between MS and WE. MS was found to be a partially significant mediator between PER and IL (H7c: $\beta = .169$, $t = 1.708$, $p = .088$).

Table 4. Mediation Analysis

Total Effect (PER -> WE)		Direct Effect (PER -> WE)		Indirect Effects of PER on WE					
Coefficient	p value	Coefficient	p value		Coefficient	SD	t value (bootstrap)	p values	BI [2.5%; 97.5%]
0.524	0.000	0.070	0.543	MS -> IL -> WE	0.052	0.039	1.357	0.175	0.001;0.166
				PER -> MS -> IL	0.169	0.099	1.708	0.088	-0.026;0.354
				PER -> MS -> IL -> WE	0.041	0.029	1.394	0.163	0.001;0.128
				PER -> IL -> WE	0.132	0.072	1.842	0.066	0.020;0.307
				PER -> MS -> WE	0.281	0.081	3.494	0.000	0.127;0.446

DISCUSSION

The above findings the measurement model is valid and reliable and that the structural model is statistically significant. This confirms the hypothesis of the study that the personal characteristics of school leaders have an impact on the work engagement of teachers. Mediation analysis confirmed that this impact is not direct but is transmitted through leaders' management styles and practices as well as their instructional leadership.

These results agree with previous scholars who asserted that the personal characteristics of school leaders, especially their personality traits, have a strong impact on teacher motivation and work engagement. These

include (Bipp, T., & Demerouti, E., 2015) who found that personality affected the way leaders communicate; (Rosete, D., & Ciarrochi, J., 2005) who asserted that the emotional instability of neurotic leaders can be contagious, and (Rosete, D., & Ciarrochi, J. (2005) who showed that neurotic leaders lead to teacher disengagement. In contrast, Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount (1998) found leaders high in agreeableness to lead to higher levels of engagement.

However, the present study is different from the above studies and most of the other studies reviewed in that the impact of leader personality characteristics on teacher engagement was not direct but was rather transmitted through their management styles and instructional leadership practices. This in line with some of the studies reviewed.

For instance Leithwood, & Sun (2012) found that transformational leaders inspire and motivate by creating a shared vision, thereby increasing teacher work engagement and job satisfaction. In contrast, Aydin, Sarier,, & Uysal, (2013) found that because transactional leaders operate mainly through rewards and penalties, they might ensure compliance without fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement. Other researchers have emphasized participative style and involving teachers in decision-making processes (Somech, A., 2010); authentic leadership, which is closely tied to a leader's genuine personality and self-awareness (Walumbwa, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J., 2008); transformational leadership (Alonderiene, R., & Majauskaite, M., 2016) and servant leadership which characterized by focusing on the growth and well-being of community members (Sun, & Wang, 2017).

Recently, there has been emphasis on ethical leadership styles, marked by fairness, integrity, and genuine concern for employees, can foster innovative behavior in teachers. This often translates to higher engagement levels and reduced turnover intentions (Tian, Q., & Sanchez, J. I., 2017). Another related style is distributed leadership which promotes a collaborative environment by sharing decision-making roles. Such practices significantly increase trust in the leader, fostering an empowered teaching community that is less likely to experience turnover (Hulpia, H., Devos, G., & Van Keer, H. (2018).

School leaders who prioritize and facilitate continuous professional development opportunities often witness elevated levels of work engagement among teachers. Such opportunities enhance teacher efficacy and job satisfaction (Louis, K. S., Dretzke, B., & Wahlstrom, K., 2010). A supportive principal is a key factor in reducing teacher burnout and enhancing well-being. Given the high-stress nature of teaching, a leader's support can directly influence a teacher's desire to remain in the profession (Gray, C., Wilcox, G., & Nordstokke, D., 2017). This is especially true in a culture characterised by regular, constructive feedback from leaders. This enhances teacher engagement and commitment to the institution (Han, J., Yin, H., & Wang, W., 2016). Negative interactions with school leaders, or a perceived unsupportive organizational climate, can be a significant factor in teachers' intentions to leave. Positive interactions, conversely, have the opposite effect (Price, H. E. (2012).

The results have also indicated the importance of instructional leadership as it is one of the mechanisms through which the effect of leaders' personal characteristics is transmitted to the teachers. This largely agrees with previous studies that emphasized instructional leadership. For instance, Sebastian, & Allensworth (2020) found leaders who create a supportive environment to lead to higher engagement among teachers. Among the many ways of supporting teachers is giving regular, constructive feedback on teaching practices (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013). Good instructional leadership practices is involving teachers in creating and sustaining a shared vision for student achievement foster a sense of collective responsibility (Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H., 2019) and involving them in coordinating the curriculum and ensuring instructional quality (Robinson, V. M., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J., 2008).

CONCLUSION

The study has supported the view of researchers that the personal qualities of school leaders have a significant impact on the way they conduct themselves and how they interact with teachers. This, among others, leads to

teacher engagement (or disengagement). Disengagement directly results into burnout and attrition. This study has found a significant impact of PER on WE, albeit an indirect one mediated by MS and IL. The mediating role MS and IL was significant, supporting the existing view in current educational leadership theory emphasizing the importance of instructional leadership and the need to adopt effective leadership styles and practices. The study highlights the need to ground current and future school leaders in Malaysia on practicing effective instructional leadership and to use supportive leadership styles such as servant leadership and authentic leadership and support the personal growth and professional development of their subordinates. When this happens, teachers will be engaged and will, hopefully, choose to stay in the noble teaching profession.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that Malaysian schools and education policymakers invest in targeted professional development programs that cultivate both the personal traits and leadership capacities of school leaders. Emphasizing emotional intelligence, adaptability, and ethical behavior can directly enhance teacher engagement. Additionally, training initiatives should promote effective leadership styles and robust instructional leadership practices, as these have been shown to mediate the positive effects of personal traits on work engagement. School systems should consider regular assessments of leadership practices, encourage reflective leadership, and create supportive environments that empower school leaders to act as role models and facilitators of teacher motivation. By strengthening these areas, schools can foster a culture of engagement, improve teacher retention, and ultimately raise the quality of educational outcomes.

For future researchers, it would be valuable to explore these relationships in a wider variety of school contexts, including different regions and types of schools, to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal or mixed-method studies could offer deeper insight into how personal traits and leadership practices interact over time to influence teacher work engagement. In addition, future research might consider including more diverse demographic variables—such as age, years of service, and school size—to see if these factors moderate the effects observed. Exploring qualitative perspectives through interviews or case studies could also help uncover the lived experiences of teachers and leaders, providing a richer understanding of the mechanisms at play. Ultimately, expanding the research in these ways can support more holistic and practical strategies for improving teacher engagement and educational leadership.

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