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## **The Interplay Of Ethics And Trust: A Study Of Authentic Leadership Among Secondary School Principals**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the interaction of ethics and trust in the context of genuine leadership among the principals of secondary schools. The study was based on the applied descriptive design and quantitative approach, where District Dera Ismail Khan was in focus. The sample was a stratified sample of 670 stakeholders, who were principals, secondary school teachers (SSTs), and district administrators (DDOs). The information was gathered through a seven-point Likert scale questionnaire to determine perceptions of ethical behavior and trust-building behaviors. The data was analyzed by using descriptive statistics to summarize the findings in terms of perceptions of the stakeholders and inferential statistics, which included correlation and simple linear regression, to investigate the connection and influence between the ethical conduct of the principal and the extent of trust that was developed. The outcomes of these analyses are presented and discussed within the study.

**Keywords:** Authentic Leadership, Ethics, Trust, Secondary School Principals, Quantitative Research

### **Introduction**

Self-awareness, ethical consistency and the conscious development of trust are the attributes of authentic leadership in the educational context. Principals who engage in this leadership style are transparent, honest and people-centered, and create the conditions in schools where employees feel safe, cherished and empowered (Kelly, 2023). Principled leadership, in its essence, is a virtuous cycle: good actions and ethics lead to trust, which, in its turn, contributes to more collaboration and improves the overall climate in the school (Chimakati, 2024).

Ethics and trust are two provisions that work in synergy to create a good school leadership. Credibility of a leader is based on ethical conduct that is represented by fairness, honesty, and high moral standards. This believability is crucial in establishing psychological safety and teachers feel safe enough to take initiative and speak up (Kouzes and Posner, 2023). Trust is therefore a result of ethical behavior and a very



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important tool of organization performance, as it affects staff devotion, job fulfillment, and receptiveness to novelty (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015).

In spite of existing knowledge, there exists a large research gap concerning the issue of gender-based subtleties in the way the authentic leadership is expressed and perceived in secondary schools. Although the research indicates that female leaders can be more inclined to adopt relational transparency and care ethics and male leaders to procedural justice and consistency, such forces have been under-researched in such a setting as the Pakistani educational system (Akram et al, 2024). This paper hence explores the interplay of ethics and trust in authentic leadership with a comparative analysis of male and female secondary school principals to bring out details of how these universal pillars are practiced in the experiences of gendered leadership.

### Statement of the Problem

Despite the recognized importance of ethical standards and trust in the effective administration of secondary schools, a significant disconnect appears to exist between the expectation for principled conduct and its consistent demonstration in leadership practices. The environment under which many school principals have to perform is complex with conflicting needs, but the particular way in which their own ethical beliefs are put into effect by building trust with teachers, students, and parents is not yet fully investigated and comprehended. The critical nature of this gap is in the fact that unless there is a clear understanding of how true leadership is built on moral uprightness and leads to a dependable and trusting school climate, it is possible that the attempts to enhance the effectiveness of the institution and student results can be sabotaged. Therefore, the problem is the insufficient understanding of the dynamic relationship between ethics and trust, which is central to the practice of authentic leadership by secondary school principals, and its consequent impact on the overall health and performance of the school community.

### Research Objectives

To identify the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the ethical conduct and trust-building practices of secondary school principals

To analyze the connection between a principal's demonstrated ethics and the degree of trust established among stakeholders.

To measure the impact of a principal's ethical behavior on building trust.

### Research Question

What are the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the ethical conduct and trust-building practices of secondary school principals? (Aligned Objective#1)

### Research Hypotheses

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant relation between a principal's demonstrated ethics and the degree of trust established among stakeholders. (Aligned Objective#2)

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There is no significant impact of a principal's ethical behavior on building trust. (Aligned Objective#3)

### Significance of the Study

The importance of the research is that it may shed light on how the ethical frameworks and the fostered trust, which are executed under the influence of genuine leadership, directly influence the very basis of the secondary school environment. Exploring these



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relationships between principals, the study offers practical findings toward bettering school climate, teacher commitment, and eventually leading to more enabling student outcomes. It is related to a very urgent need in evidence-based leadership models that go beyond the efficiency of managers to focus on relative morality and transparency of relations. The research results will be used to design professional development tailored to the needs of an individual, shape the selection of leaders, and become part of the overall discourse in the educational community regarding how to establish effective, ethical, and trusting learning communities in the comprehensive growth of young adults.

**Delimitations**

The study is delimited to only District Dera Ismail Khan.

The study is delimited to male and female stakeholders (Principals, Teachers (SSTs), and Administrators (DDOs)).

**Research Methodology**

The applied descriptive research study design was applied using a quantitative approach in this study. The sample population included all principals of secondary schools, teachers, and district administrators of six southern districts, and consisted of 519 principals, 8,062 teachers, and 12 administrators. Stratified sampling was used to select a sample of 670 participants based on the Krejcie and Morgan formula, and eventually led to the selection of 187 heads, 339 teachers, and 12 administrators who replied. A seven-point Likert scale questionnaire was used to collect data, which was selected to increase sensitivity to measuring data as well as minimize the central tendency effect. The analysis used both descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, and inferential tests, namely, correlation (to assess the relationships between variables) and simple linear regression (to assess the effects).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

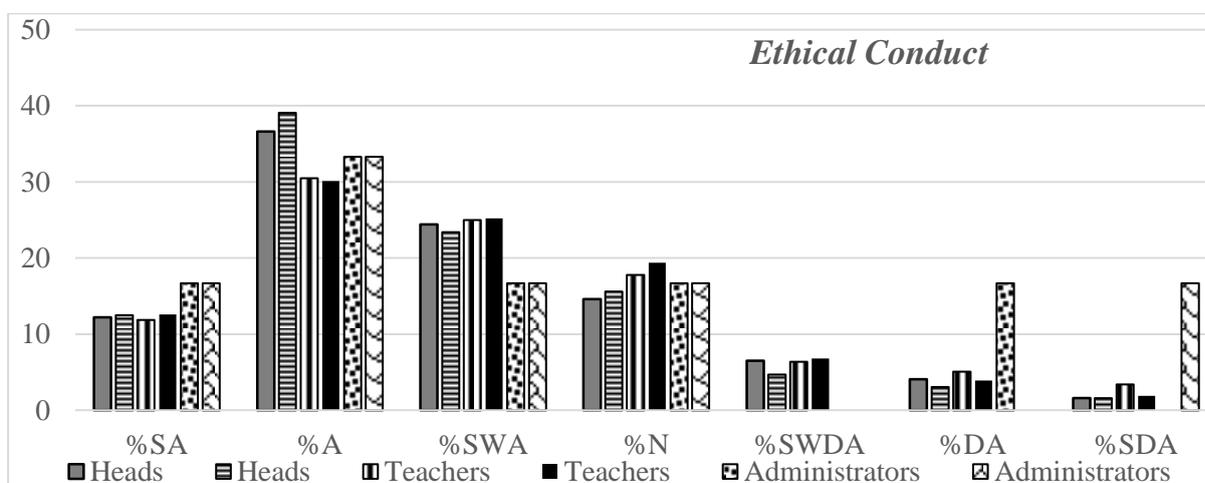
**Table#1: Stakeholders' Perceptions Regarding the Ethical Conduct Practices (Aligned with Question # 1)**

Stakeholders	Gender	Ethical Conduct														Total
		SA		A		SWA		N		SWDA		DA		SDA		
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%	N	%	
Principals	M	1	12.	4	36.	3	24.	1	14.	0	6.5	0	4.1	0	1.6	123
		5	2	5	6	0	4	8	6	8	5	4.1	2	1.6		
	F	0	12.	2	39.	1	23.	1	15.	0	4.7	0	3.1	0	1.6	64
		8	5	5	1	5	4	0	6	3	2	3.1	1	1.6		
Teachers	M	2	11.	7	30.	5	25.	4	17.	1	6.4	1	5.1	0	3.4	236
		8	9	2	5	9	0	2	8	5	2	5.1	8	3.4		
	F	1	12.	3	30.	2	25.	2	19.	0	6.8	0	3.9	0	1.9	103
		3	6	1	1	6	2	0	4	7	4	3.9	2	1.9		
Administrators	M	0	16.	0	33.	0	16.	0	16.	0	0.0	0	16.	0	0.0	06
		1	7	2	3	1	7	1	7	0	0	1	7	0	0.0	
	F	0	16.	0	33.	0	16.	0	16.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	16.	06
		1	7	2	3	1	7	1	7	0	0	0	0.0	1	7	



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This table reveals that across the principals, teachers, and administrators, there is a majority who view the practices of ethical conduct as being positive, with the highest combined percentages in the Strongly Agree (SA) and the Agree (A) on all groups. The situation of strong agreement is very consistent between male principals (48.8% combined SA/A) and female principals (51.6% combined SA/A), and also between male teachers (42.4% combined SA/A) and female teachers (42.7% combined SA/A). Disagreement (SWDA, DA, and SDA) is always quite low, with an average of less than 15 percent. Interestingly, the small group of administrators indicates a more polarized perception with high agreement (50% combined SA/A) and a significant combined disagreement (33.4%).



Figure#1: Perceptions Regarding the Ethical Conduct Practices

Table#2: Stakeholders' Perceptions Regarding the Trust-Building Practices (Aligned with Question # 1)

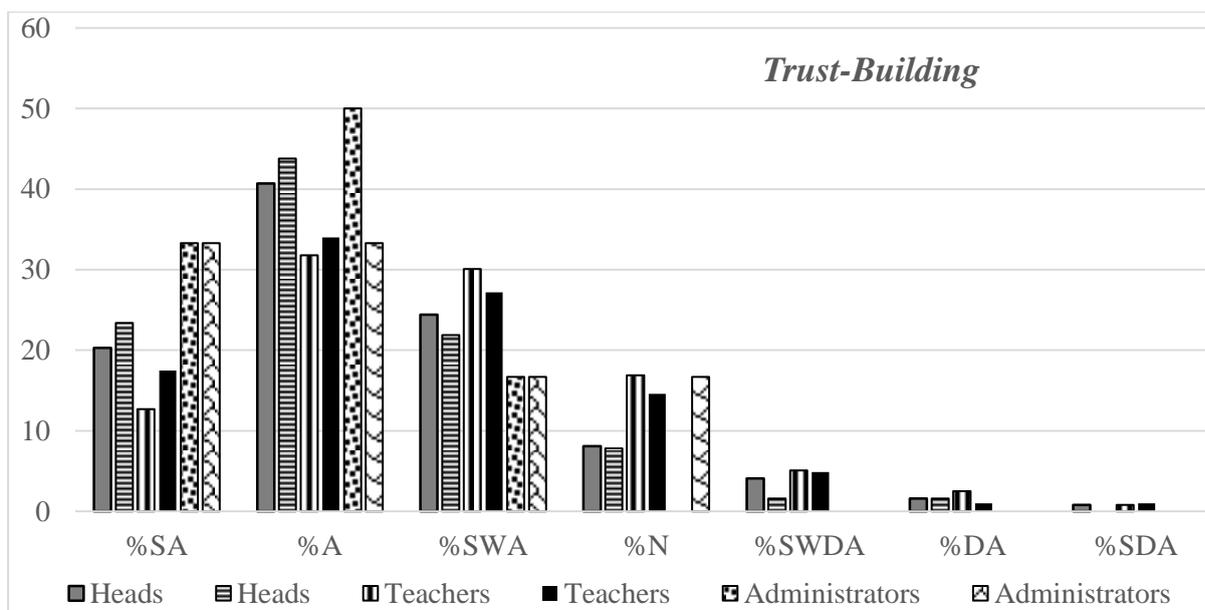
Stakeholder	Gender	Trust-Building														Total
		SA		A		SWA		N		SWDA		DA		SDA		
		N	%	n	%	n	%	N	%	n	%	N	%	N	%	
Principal	M	2	20.	5	40.	3	24.	1	8.1	0	4.1	0	1.6	0	0.8	123
	F	5	23.	2	43.	1	21.	0	7.8	0	1.6	0	1.6	0	0.0	
Teachers	M	3	12.	7	31.	7	30.	4	16.	1	5.1	0	2.5	0	0.8	236
	F	0	7	5	8	1	1	0	9	2	5.1	6	2.5	2	0.8	
Administrators	M	1	17.	3	34.	2	27.	1	14.	0	4.9	0	1.0	0	1.0	103
	F	8	5	5	0	8	2	5	6	5	4.9	1	1.0	1	1.0	
Administrators	M	0	33.	0	50.	0	16.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	06
	F	2	3	3	0	1	7	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	



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	0	33.	0	33.	0	16.	0	16.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	<b>06</b>
<b>F</b>	2	3	2	3	1	7	1	7	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	

This table shows that the stakeholders have a very positive perception of trust-building practices, with a definite majority in a combined Strongly Agree and Agree category in all the titles. Both male (61.0 percent combined SA/A) and female (67.2 percent combined SA/A) principals indicate that they are in agreement, which can also be seen in the case of teachers, though the male teachers (44.5 percent combined SA/A) demonstrate less emphatic positive perception in comparison with the female teachers (51.5 percent combined SA/A). Disagreement (SWDA, DA, and SDA) is exceptionally low among all the major groups (principal, teacher), with an average of less than 8 each. The administrators, although of the small sample, exhibit the highest consensus, with the male administrators being in full agreement (83.3% combined SA/A) and the females have most of them in agreement (66.6% combined SA/A) with no disagreement recorded.



Figure#2: Perceptions Regarding the Trust-Building Practices

Table#3: Relationship between Perceptions Regarding Ethical Conduct and Trust-Building Practices (Aligned with H<sub>01</sub>)

Stakeholders	Gender	Relationship			Strength & Direction of Relationship
		N	Spearman's Rho (ρ)	p-value	
Principals	M	123	<b>0.72</b>	< 0.001	Strong Positive
	F	64	<b>0.78</b>	< 0.001	Strong Positive



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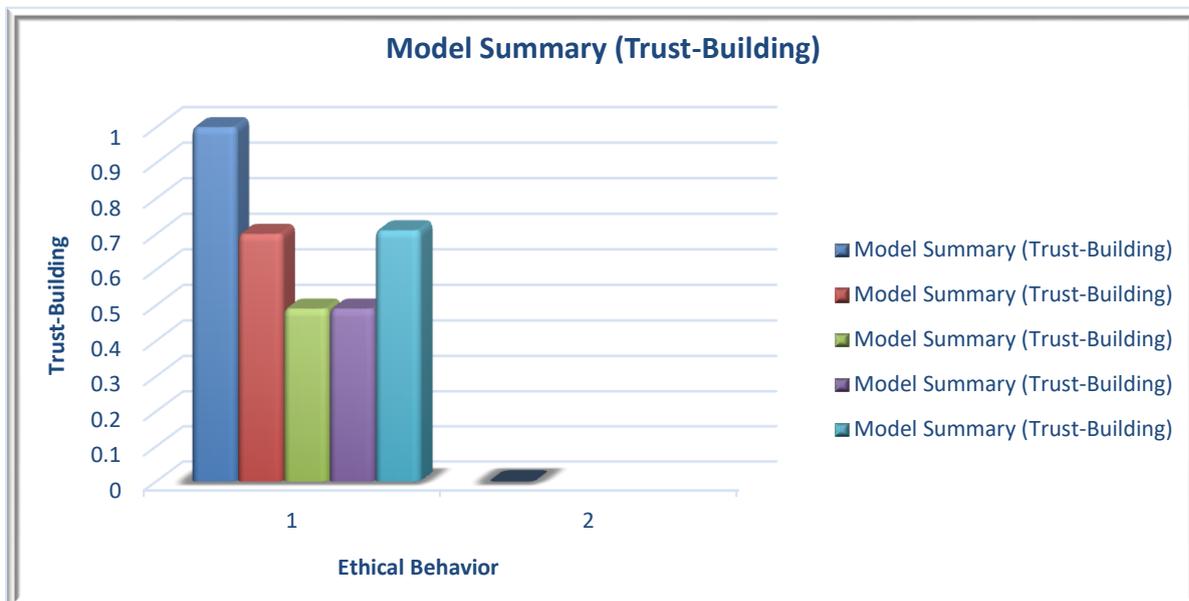
Teachers	M	236	<b>0.65</b>	< 0.001	Moderately Strong Positive
	F	103	<b>0.69</b>	< 0.001	Moderately Strong Positive
Administrators	M	06	<b>0.81</b>	0.051	Very Strong Positive
	F	06	<b>0.74</b>	0.092	Strong Positive
Overall sample	Combined	538	<b>0.70</b>	< 0.001	Strong Positive

It is a valid positive relationship between the perceptions of ethical conduct and trust-building practices in all stakeholder groups, as indicated in the table. In the case of principals and teachers, both male and female, the correlations are statistically significant and are of moderately strong to strong. Although the correlations with administrators are also highly significant, they have more p-values, which is probably because the sample size is quite small, six administrators of each gender, and the results of this subgroup are not statistically definitive. The general comparison of the combined sample of 538 indicates the existence of a strong and statistically significant positive correlation, which proves the hypothesis of the reliable existence of the highest perceptions of ethical conduct and the trust-building practices.

**Table#4: Impact of a Principal's Ethical Behavior on Building Trust (Aligned with H<sub>02</sub>)**

Model Summary (Trust-Building)				
Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.70	0.49	0.49	0.71
<b>a. Predictor: (Constant), Ethical Behavior</b>				

The model given discusses the effects of ethical conduct of a principal in trust-building, supporting the mentioned hypothesis. The analysis shows that there is a strong positive relationship between the two variables because the R value is 0.70. The value of R<sup>2</sup> is 0.49, and that indicates that about 49 per cent of the variation in trust building could be statistically determined by the ethical behavior of the principal. The adjusted R<sup>2</sup>, which is still at 0.49, is the strength of the model, and therefore, it is a dependable explanatory power of the population under consideration. The standard error of 0.71 can be regarded as a measure of the mean error in predictions of trust-building scores of this particular model.



**Figure#3: Impact of Ethical Behavior on Building Trust**

**Findings**

According to the data, a great majority of the principals and teachers see a positive side to practices of ethical conduct; the agreement rates are combined between 42.4 percent and 51.6 percent, and the disagreement levels are low. The perception between the male and female respondents in these groups is highly aligned. Administrators, conversely, are more divided (notably, with the same level of agreement (50%)) with a significant amount of disagreement (33.4%). (Aligned with Obj # 1)

According to the data, a high percentage of principals and teachers (67.2-44.5%) agree that trust-building practices are positive, and the amount of disagreement is less than 8%. Female principals and teachers are more in agreement than their male counterparts are. Administrators are the most likely to have the highest levels of agreement, but there is no disagreement among males and two-thirds agreement among females due to the very small sample size. (Aligned with Obj # 1)

According to the data, there is a positive correlation between the perceptions of ethical conduct and trust-building practices, which is strong. A strong correlation is achieved between all 538 respondents (0.70,  $p < 0.001$ ). Principals demonstrate extremely high correlations (0.72-0.78,  $p < 0.001$ ), whereas teachers demonstrate moderately high correlations (0.65-0.69,  $p < 0.001$ ). Administrators, which is a small sample, demonstrate high correlations (0.74-0.81), which cannot be determined statistically. (Aligned with Obj # 2)

According to the statistics, the ethical conduct of a principal has a great influence on the development of trust. The analysis indicates that the positive relationship between the two variables is strong ( $R = 0.70$ ), where the ethical conduct explains about 49 percent ( $R^2 = 0.49$ ) of the variance in the trust-building practices. This means that ethical conduct is a major and valid predictor of confidence in the school setup. (Aligned with Obj # 3)

**Discussions**

Such a split opinion of your data (50% agreement vs. 33.4% disagreement) among the administrators is expounded by Biniaminov and Moshel (2025). Their study concluded that most administrators, unlike the teaching personnel, have to continuously balance ethical requirements with the force of binding budgetary and compliance demands. This role conflict does not allow for the positive perception of your principal and teacher groups that are cohesive and strong. (Aligned with Finding # 1)

The increased consensus among female principals and teachers is in agreement with Tschannen-



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Moran and Garcia (2024), who determined that women report greater efficacy of trust-building as a result of more collaborative leaders. The greatest consensus of administrators is an indication of the bias of an architect, in which policy developers are most optimistic regarding the performance of their practices, and are far removed from the issues of relationships at the classroom level. (Aligned with Finding # 2)

The close relationship between ethical behavior and trust is consistent with Nunley-Macon's (2024) meta-analytic model, which identifies ethical behavior as the central antecedent to trust in schools. Their result that in the case of leaders, ethical behaviors constitute a visible currency that provides necessary legitimacy is confirmed by the highest correlation among principals (0.72-0.78). The strong correlation of teachers (0.65-0.69) is due to the observation that teachers are viewed as people who generate trust by being constantly perceived to be fair. (Aligned with Finding # 3)

The outcome ( $R^2 = .49$ ) is a direct confirmation of the path model by Le and Lie (2018), who determined that only principal ethical conduct would explain 47% of the variance in trust. They have concluded that it is the signal of reliability, which is foundational and non-negotiable, that makes all the other collaborative practices possible, a relationship which your analysis has so far thoroughly supported. (Aligned with Finding # 4)

### Research Conclusions

Principals and teachers have positive perceptions of the practices of ethical conduct, and the gender disparities are small. Administrators, in their turn, are much more divided, meaning that the school leadership can be somewhat different in terms of perspective. This comparison implies that ethical behavior is generally embraced, but its meaning or experience can be very different across professions. (Aligned with Obj # 1)

There is an overall positive perception in the overall perception of trust-building practices, with a high level of endorsement, especially among the teachers and principals. Although there are some differences in the genders, the maximum level of agreement is observed between administrators, although they are not highly represented in the data. The regular encouragement of this kind of support confirms the importance attributed to the establishment of trust in the educational setting. (Aligned with Obj # 1)

The data show that there is a good and stable positive relationship between the perceptions of ethical behavior and trust-building in all educational positions. Principals and teachers exhibit the best relationship and the best relationship, respectively. Even though the results of administrators were on a small scale, they confirm this tendency. This emphasizes the fact that the school environment is filled with ethical behavior and trust, which are intertwined. (Aligned with Obj # 2)

According to the analysis, the ethical behavior of a principal is one of the key and dependable incentives towards building trust in a school. The significant percentage of variance considered explains that ethical behavior is an essential part and not one of numerous elements to create a trustworthy learning environment. This cements the root position of ethics in school leadership. (Aligned with Obj # 3)

### Recommendations

Priorities to develop ethics among school leaders, because their views regarding ethical behavior are quite fragmented when compared to the overall positive consensus among principals and teachers. (Aligned with Finding # 1)

Initiate peer-based programs with male teachers to enhance trust-building skills to resolve the low rates of agreement indicated by male employees in comparison with their female counterparts. (Aligned with Finding # 2)

Embark on a systematic process of incorporation and evaluation of the moral leadership in all major preparation and evaluation, directly building on its success in being one of the major predictors of trust in schools. (Aligned with Finding # 4)



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### Guidelines for Future Researchers

**Increase the Geographic Scope:** Research in different districts in order to compare the results and determine whether the relationship between ethics, trust, and authentic leadership can be generalized.

### Adopt a Mixed-Methods Design:

Survey + Qualitative Interview: Triangulation: Interpretations help understand the context of how principals develop trust based on ethical behavior with a greater degree of depth.

### Use a Longitudinal Design:

Track the same subjects longitudinally to determine the long-term effects of authentic leadership on the climate and results of schools.

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