

A THEORETICAL INTEGRATION OF AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP, SOCIAL EXCHANGE, AND INNOVATION: A PILOT STUDY IN MALAYSIAN SCHOOLS

NIK KARIMAH HASSAN & NURUL FADLY HABIDIN

1 Fakulti Pengurusan dan Ekonomi, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 15900 Tanjung Malim, Perak, MALAYSIA,
Email: p20192001579@siswa.upsi.edu.my; fadly@upsi.edu.my

Correspondent Email: fadly@upsi.edu.my

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Abstract: This pilot study presents a theoretical integration of Authentic Leadership Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Schumpeter's Innovation Theory to examine how school leadership influences teacher innovation. Specifically, it investigates the relationship between principals' authentic leadership (AL) and teachers' innovative work behaviour (IWB), with a focus on the mediating role of interpersonal trust (IT). The study is situated within the Malaysian educational context, characterised by hierarchical structures and compliance-oriented cultures, which often constrain professional agency and innovation. A total of 150 secondary school teachers in the Gombak district of Kuala Lumpur participated in the study. Validated instruments were used to measure all key constructs, with strong internal consistency reliability established through Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). Content validity was confirmed using the Item Content Validity Index (I-CVI), and data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4.0. The results show that authentic leadership does not directly influence innovative work behaviour. However, interpersonal trust fully mediates this relationship, indicating that trust is a critical psychosocial mechanism linking leadership intent to innovative teacher behaviours. This finding reinforces the significance of relational pathways in leadership practice and supports the integration of trust-based leadership models within bureaucratic school systems. This study contributes a theoretically grounded and contextually relevant relational model of innovation, offering insights for school leaders, policymakers, and researchers. It also highlights the need for future research to explore additional psychosocial variables such as work engagement, psychological safety, and school culture to strengthen the model and support sustainable educational innovation.

Keywords: Pilot Study, Authentic Leadership, Interpersonal Trust, Innovative Work Behaviour, Malaysian Teachers



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INTRODUCTION

Authentic leadership has attracted significant scholarly attention in the field of educational research due to its emphasis on ethical, relational transparency, and values-driven decision-making (Avolio et al., 2004; Walumbwa et al., 2008). In the context of Malaysian secondary schools, principals are expected not only to manage operations but also to cultivate a professional culture that fosters teacher motivation, interpersonal trust, and autonomous practice (Sidek et al., 2021).

Despite ongoing policy initiatives promoting innovation, fostering innovative work behaviour (IWB) among teachers remains a complex challenge in Malaysia. One contributing factor is the underexplored role of relational and psychological mechanisms that influence teacher innovation. Among these, interpersonal trust derived from Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) emerges as a critical factor. It is developed through reciprocal, respectful, and emotionally supportive interactions between school leaders and teachers. When trust is established, it nurtures psychological safety, thereby encouraging teachers to take pedagogical risks, experiment with new methods, and engage in proactive problem-solving (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

This study conceptualizes teachers' IWB as a socially embedded form of innovation, aligning with Schumpeter's (1934) view of innovation as a disruptive force that redefines existing norms and routines. Within the school setting, such innovation is not only structurally enabled through policies and resources but also relationally activated primarily through leadership practices that build and sustain interpersonal trust.

To address this theoretical and empirical gap, the current pilot study explores interpersonal trust as a mediating variable in the relationship between principals' authentic leadership and teachers' innovative work. Situated within the unique socio-organizational realities of Malaysian secondary education, the study offers preliminary insights into the leadership conditions necessary for fostering school-based innovation and presents a contextually grounded model for future research.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The structural landscape of Malaysian education is predominantly characterised by rigid hierarchical authority, centralised governance, and top-down decision-making processes (Yahaya, Noordin, & Abas, 2020; Ali, Salleh, & Hassan, 2021). While such bureaucratic structures may support standardisation and control, they often inhibit the professional discretion, creativity, and autonomy necessary for educational innovation. In this context, teachers may feel constrained by prescriptive expectations, limited voice, and a lack of relational support, thereby weakening their capacity for innovative work behaviour (IWB).

Furthermore, growing empirical evidence points to rising administrative overload and high-stakes accountability systems as critical stressors affecting teacher well-being. These systemic pressures have been associated with increased rates of burnout, declining job satisfaction, and premature retirement among Malaysian teachers (Ismail & Ramli, 2019). Left unaddressed, these organisational stressors risk depleting the very human capital required to drive meaningful educational transformation.

Although innovation has become a central narrative in education reform agendas, particularly within the Malaysian Education Blueprint, the underlying psychological and relational mechanisms that facilitate innovation at the teacher level remain insufficiently theorised and empirically tested. Specifically, there is limited evidence on how school leadership, particularly authentic leadership, enables innovation through trust-based relationships in hierarchical educational environments.

While international studies suggest that authentic leadership can foster innovation by building interpersonal trust (Rego et al., 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2018), such findings have yet to be rigorously validated within the Malaysian schooling context. Moreover, the mediating role of interpersonal trust in translating leadership behaviours into teacher innovation is often underexplored, especially in collectivist cultures where social dynamics and authority relationships are distinct (Sidek et al., 2021).

To address this theoretical and contextual gap, the present pilot study examines interpersonal trust as a mediating variable in the relationship between principals' authentic leadership and teachers' innovative work behaviour. In doing so, it responds to calls for context-sensitive research that accounts for the psychosocial dimensions of educational leadership within structurally rigid school systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authentic Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB)

Authentic leadership is increasingly acknowledged as a foundational driver of trust, engagement, and innovation in organisational settings (Avolio et al., 2004; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Characterised by self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced information processing, and an internalised moral compass, authentic leaders foster environments conducive to positive discretionary behaviour among followers. In corporate and public sector contexts, research has shown that such leadership correlates positively with employees' innovative work behaviour (Rego et al., 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2018).

However, within educational settings particularly in high power-distance and collectivist cultures like Malaysia, the empirical validation of this relationship remains limited (Sidek et al., 2021). School leaders often operate under bureaucratic constraints, which may suppress relational transparency and limit opportunities for fostering innovation through values-based leadership. This gap calls for more context-specific exploration of how authentic leadership behaviours are perceived and enacted in schools, and whether they indeed translate into innovative teaching practices.

Interpersonal Trust as a Mediating Mechanism

Interpersonal trust has been widely theorised as a central enabler of workplace collaboration and innovation (McAllister, 1995). It comprises two core dimensions: cognitive trust, which reflects perceived competence and reliability, and affective trust, rooted in emotional closeness and care. In educational environments, trust between teachers and school leaders has been

linked to increased risk-taking, idea-sharing, and participation in change initiatives (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Brewster & Railsback, 2003).

Leaders who demonstrate fairness, consistency, and relational sensitivity are more likely to cultivate trust-based school cultures. In turn, these relational climates provide psychological safety, defined as a belief that one can express themselves without fear of embarrassment or punishment which is essential for innovation (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Prior studies indicate that when trust is established, teachers are more inclined to adopt new methods, question norms, and engage in collective problem-solving (Gilley et al., 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Despite these insights, empirical studies examining trust as a mediator, particularly in Asian school contexts remain scarce. This study addresses that research gap by positioning trust as the psychological bridge between leadership intention and behavioural innovation.

Schumpeter's Theory of Innovation

Schumpeter (1934) defines innovation as a dynamic force that disrupts equilibrium by introducing new combinations of resources, processes, and ideas. Within the educational context, this concept translates to teachers challenging traditional pedagogies, designing novel instructional approaches, and reimagining classroom dynamics. While innovation is often associated with creativity and individual agency, Schumpeter's view also highlights the systemic and structural supports needed to foster sustainable innovation.

Damanpour and Schneider (2006) argue that public sector innovation, such as in education, depends not only on individual initiative but also on leadership encouragement, organisational openness, and trust-based collaboration. As such, teachers' innovative work behaviour is understood as both a psychological and structural outcome: it emerges from personal motivation but is enabled through relational and institutional support.

Theoretical Integration

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives, Authentic Leadership Theory (Avolio et al., 2004) proposes that leaders who exhibit authenticity through ethical action, self-awareness, and relational openness, are more likely to foster trust and meaningful engagement among followers.

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) provides a lens to understand how interpersonal trust develops through reciprocal and respectful leader-follower interactions, laying the foundation for discretionary behaviours such as innovation.

Schumpeter's Innovation Theory (1934) positions innovation as a transformative response to stagnation and rigidity, requiring leadership that empowers and supports disruption of existing routines.

Integrating these theories offers a more comprehensive understanding of how authentic leadership, through the mediating role of trust, can influence teachers' engagement in innovation. Particularly in highly structured school systems like those in Malaysia, this integration offers a framework that recognises the importance of relational conditions in enabling school-level transformation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework, illustrated in Figure 1, positions authentic leadership (AL) as the exogenous variable, interpersonal trust (IT) as the mediating construct, and innovative work behaviour (IWB) as the endogenous outcome. This framework aligns with prior empirical models (e.g., Walumbwa et al., 2008; McAllister, 1995; Rego et al., 2012), and reflects the theoretical integration proposed in this study. The hypotheses tested include:

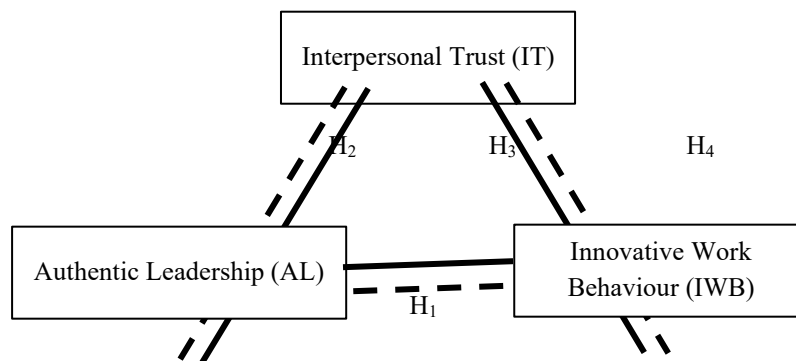
H1: Authentic leadership (AL) positively influences innovative work behaviour (IWB).

H2: Authentic leadership (AL) positively influences interpersonal trust (IT).

H3: Interpersonal trust (IT) positively influences innovative work behaviour (IWB).

H4: Interpersonal trust (IT) mediates the relationship between authentic leadership (AL) and innovative work behaviour (IWB).

Figure 1



METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, deemed appropriate for examining relationships among latent constructs at a single point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hair et al., 2021). The primary aim of this pilot phase was to assess the validity, reliability, and feasibility of the measurement model and to preliminarily test theoretical assumptions before scaling the study to a national level.

The study focused on investigating how principals' authentic leadership (AL) influences teachers' innovative work behaviour (IWB), with interpersonal trust (IT) as a mediating variable. Four hypotheses were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). This analytical approach is widely recommended for exploratory models with relatively small sample sizes and complex path relationships (Hair et al., 2019).

Sample and Context

A total of 150 secondary school teachers from the Gombak District in Kuala Lumpur participated in the study. The Gombak district was selected due to its urban diversity and accessibility for pilot implementation. Teachers were selected using purposive sampling,

targeting individuals with at least one year of teaching experience in their current school, ensuring familiarity with their principals' leadership behaviours. The sample size meets the minimum requirement for pilot testing in PLS-SEM models, where a sample of 100–200 is considered sufficient for stable parameter estimation (Hair et al., 2021).

Instrumentation

Three validated instruments were employed in the study, each measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree): Authentic Leadership (AL): Measured using the 16-item Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008), covering four dimensions—self-awareness, internalised moral perspective, relational transparency, and balanced processing. Interpersonal Trust (IT): Assessed using the 11-item scale by McAllister (1995), which captures both cognitive and affective dimensions of trust. Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB): Measured using the 9-item scale by De Jong and Den Hartog (2010), which evaluates three key aspects: idea generation, idea promotion, and idea realisation. All instruments have demonstrated robust psychometric properties in previous organisational studies, including acceptable construct validity and internal consistency.

Instrument Validation and Reliability

Content validity was established through expert review using the Item Content Validity Index (I-CVI). Five subject-matter experts in educational leadership and psychometrics independently evaluated each item's relevance on a 4-point scale. Items with $I-CVI \geq 0.78$ were retained, following the benchmark recommended by Polit and Beck (2006).

Minor linguistic adjustments were made to improve item clarity and contextual suitability for Malaysian educators. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all constructs exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70: Authentic Leadership ($\alpha = 0.91$), Interpersonal Trust ($\alpha = 0.89$), Innovative Work Behaviour ($\alpha = 0.88$). These results confirmed the reliability of all measurement constructs for use in the full-scale study.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4.0 software. This technique was chosen for its suitability in exploratory studies involving complex models and smaller samples (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis involved two primary stages: Measurement Model Assessment: Examined construct reliability (Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted, AVE), and indicator loadings. Structural Model Assessment: Evaluated path coefficients, t-statistics, and significance levels via bootstrapping (5000 samples). Mediation analysis was also conducted to assess the indirect effect of authentic leadership on IWB via interpersonal trust.

RESULTS

Measurement Model

Evaluation Prior to testing the hypothesised relationships, the measurement model was assessed to ensure the constructs met the criteria for reliability and validity. Results indicated that all reflective constructs exceeded the recommended thresholds: Internal Consistency Reliability: All constructs recorded Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values above 0.70, demonstrating acceptable internal consistency (Hair et al., 2021). Authentic Leadership: $\alpha = 0.91$, CR = 0.93, Interpersonal Trust: $\alpha = 0.89$, CR = 0.91, Innovative Work Behaviour: $\alpha = 0.88$, CR = 0.90

Convergent Validity:

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs were above 0.50, indicating that the latent variables explained a sufficient proportion of variance in their indicators: AL: AVE = 0.62, IT: AVE = 0.59, IWB: AVE = 0.57

Content Validity:

All measurement items had previously undergone expert validation via Item Content Validity Index (I-CVI), with retained items scoring ≥ 0.78 (Polit & Beck, 2006). These results confirm that the measurement model demonstrates adequate psychometric properties and is fit for hypothesis testing in the structural model.

Structural Model

Following validation of the measurement model, the structural relationships among variables were examined using bootstrapping with 5000 subsamples. The path coefficients (β), t-values, p-values, and decision outcomes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H ₁	AL \rightarrow IWB	-0.034	0.352	0.725	Not Supported
H ₂	AL \rightarrow IT	0.612	10.563	0.000	Supported
H ₃	IT \rightarrow IWB	0.787	14.891	0.000	Supported
H ₄	AL \rightarrow IT \rightarrow IWB	0.482	7.132	<0.001	Full Mediation

Interpretation of Structural Model Findings:

H1: Authentic leadership did not have a significant direct effect on innovative work behaviour. This suggests that without relational mechanisms, leadership alone does not predict innovation.

H2: Authentic leadership had a significant positive effect on interpersonal trust, consistent with previous findings in both educational and organisational research (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Rego et al., 2012).

H3: Interpersonal trust had a strong and significant effect on innovative work behaviour, indicating that trust is a key relational enabler for teachers' discretionary engagement in innovation.

H4: Mediation analysis showed a full mediation effect—interpersonal trust entirely accounted for the influence of authentic leadership on IWB. This aligns with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that trust emerges through quality leader–follower exchanges and translates into reciprocal behaviours such as innovation.

These results support the theoretical proposition that trust acts as a relational bridge between leadership behaviours and teacher innovation, especially in hierarchical and bureaucratic educational systems like Malaysia's.

DISCUSSION AND FINDING

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this pilot study offer critical insights into the relational mechanisms underpinning innovation in Malaysian schools. Specifically, the study demonstrates that authentic leadership alone does not directly influence teachers' innovative work behaviour (IWB). Instead, interpersonal trust serves as a full mediator, enabling the conversion of ethical leadership behaviours into innovative practices.

This result aligns with previous research emphasising that leadership effectiveness is not merely a function of individual style or ethical posture, but also of the quality of social exchanges between leaders and followers (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). In Malaysian schools, which are often characterised by centralised bureaucracy and high-power distance (Yahaya et al., 2020), trust functions as a form of relational currency—necessary for empowering teacher agency and discretionary innovation.

Furthermore, the strong positive effect of interpersonal trust on IWB supports Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), affirming that reciprocal relationships grounded in fairness, care, and consistency foster psychological safety. This safety, in turn, enables teachers to take pedagogical risks and explore novel instructional approaches (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

The full mediation pathway observed also validates the Schumpeterian view of innovation as a process that requires structural support and leadership-facilitated disruption of normative routines (Schumpeter, 1934; Damanpour & Schneider, 2006). In this study, trust plays the enabling role, bridging the structural rigidity of schooling with the behavioural openness required for change.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways:

Contextualising Authentic Leadership:

While authentic leadership has been widely studied in Western and corporate contexts, this study provides evidence of its relevance and limitation within Malaysian educational systems, where hierarchical norms constrain direct leader influence on innovation.

Extending Trust Theory in Schools:

By empirically validating interpersonal trust as a full mediator, the study advances the argument that trust is not simply an organisational climate factor, but a psychological mechanism that enables complex behaviours such as innovation.

Theoretical Integration:

The integration of Authentic Leadership Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Innovation Theory offers a comprehensive model for understanding how relational leadership translates into innovation in schools filling a critical theoretical gap in educational leadership research.

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings offer several implications for school leaders, policymakers, and leadership development practitioners:

Leadership Training and Development

Leadership programmes should move beyond technical competencies and include relational modules such as trust-building, emotional intelligence, reflective dialogue, and relational ethics. Principals must be equipped not only to lead, but to relate and connect meaningfully with teachers (Brackett et al., 2011; Goleman et al., 2013).

School Culture and Psychological Safety

School leaders should prioritise building environments of psychological safety, where teachers feel valued, heard, and safe to challenge conventional practices. This requires dismantling overly bureaucratic norms and investing in relational capital.

Educational Policy

Review Policies that over-emphasise accountability and compliance should be reviewed to balance autonomy and innovation. Trust-driven innovation cannot flourish in schools where surveillance and rigid evaluation dominate.

Talent Retention and Innovation

Given rising teacher attrition due to burnout (Ismail & Ramli, 2019), trust-based leadership may serve as a protective factor, retaining educators by fostering meaningful engagement and innovation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this pilot study provides foundational insights, further research is necessary to deepen understanding and generalise findings. Studies should include larger and more diverse samples across different Malaysian zones to examine the stability of these relationships in varying school cultures. Future studies may consider examining moderating variables such as psychological safety, school culture, teachers' work engagement, and leadership tenure to strengthen the explanatory power of the relational framework. Mixed-method or longitudinal designs would provide richer, more nuanced insights into how trust is built over time, and how it shapes innovation trajectories in schools.

CONCLUSION

This pilot study offers preliminary yet significant insights into the relational dynamics that enable innovation within Malaysian schools. Specifically, the study demonstrates that authentic leadership alone does not directly influence teachers' innovative work behaviour (IWB). Rather, interpersonal trust fully mediates this relationship, highlighting trust as a critical psychosocial mechanism that transforms leadership intent into meaningful pedagogical innovation.

By integrating Authentic Leadership Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Schumpeter's Theory of Innovation, this study provides a novel conceptual framework that foregrounds the relational conditions necessary for school-level transformation. In the context of Malaysian schools often governed by rigid hierarchies and procedural constraints, trust emerges as a strategic lever, enabling teachers to engage in risk-taking, creativity, and reflective practice.

The results also affirm the relevance of contextualised leadership research, particularly in non-Western and collectivist environments where leadership operates within cultural, bureaucratic, and emotional boundaries. This study contributes to the growing body of evidence that innovation in education is not merely technical or procedural, but profoundly relational.

While the findings are based on a pilot sample and should be interpreted with caution, they lay the groundwork for a full-scale national study. Future research should build upon this model, incorporating diverse school contexts and exploring additional psychosocial constructs

such as psychological safety, workload stressors, and collective efficacy. Longitudinal designs may also help to track how trust evolves and sustains innovation over time.

Ultimately, the study reinforces a core proposition, in education, leadership without trust is unlikely to yield innovation. For schools to thrive in the face of complexity and reform, leadership practices must be not only ethical and strategic but relationally grounded and trust-enabling.

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