

Leadership Transitions and Institutional Transformation: A Comparative Study of Two Principals at a Private Community-Based School, Karachi

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Abstract

Educational leadership is a critical determinant of institutional performance, teacher efficacy, and student outcomes. It promotes academic excellence, innovation and the holistic development of students and staff through shared vision, transparent communication, inspiration and cultural reforms. Effective leadership behaviors are demonstrated through leadership style and type, which may vary from one individual to another. This paper presents the impacts of leadership transition on institutional progress at a private Community-Based School (CBS) in Karachi. It compares the transformational interventions of the Senior Principal (post-2019) with the transactional model applied in the preceding administrative period of the Ex-Principal. This qualitative case study explores the changes in school culture, academic and administrative processes, and evaluates stakeholder experiences through semi-structured interviews with ten stakeholders. Data collected from stakeholders was critically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis. Their perspectives identified a shift from transactional to transformative-holistic education, the architecture of trust and accessible leadership, strategic empowerment and professionalization of teaching, and navigated challenges and emerging frontiers. The findings from CBS uncover an influential transition from a top-down, transactional model to a transformational, relational, and participatory approach (Kotter, 1996). This study affirms that leadership transitions, grounded in clear vision and relational consistency, can serve as powerful catalysts. Conversely, it also highlights persistent structural challenges such as large class sizes and language development needs, which explicitly reflect that change unfolds gradually and involves multiple steps for sustainable educational improvement. Hence, to mitigate challenges, this paper concludes with recommendations for school leadership, policy makers, educators and researchers working in similar educational contexts.

Keywords: *qualitative case study, leadership behavior, transformational interventions, transactional model, reflexive thematic analysis, strategic empowerment, participatory approach, leadership transitions, succession planning, inclusive education.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Educational change is a complex and dynamic process that requires thoughtful leadership, a shared vision, and sustained efforts. Michael Fullan's Change Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding why some educational reforms succeed while others fail, emphasizing seven interrelated components: moral purpose, understanding change, capacity building, coherence making, relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing, and sustainability (Fullan, 2002; Fullan, 2016). Similarly, Peter Senge's concept of the learning organization, built on the Five Disciplines of systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning, provides a complementary lens for examining how schools can sustain change through continuous collective learning (Senge, 1990).

Fullan (2002) conceptualizes effective leaders as moral agents who combine "moral purpose with an understanding of the change process." Educational leadership is a key factor in shaping institutional effectiveness, academic quality, and administrative functioning; particularly in contexts where schools face decline (Bush, 2018, 2020). In urban centres of Pakistan like Karachi, educational leadership encounters unique challenges as schools often operate under significant resource constraints, societal pressures, and complex administrative hierarchies. These challenges have caused an incremental rise in the frequency of leadership transitions in schools as new leaders fail within their first few months, leading to costly disruptions in performance and morale. Common downsides of these disruptions include inadequate succession planning, cultural misalignment and resistance to change which urges the need to research into frameworks that demonstrate resilience and adaptability to change during the critical period of transition.

Leadership transitions establish significant moments in organizational history. It not only involves handing over roles, but catalyzing institutional transformations through shared visions, and reshaping strategies, operational structure and culture. Effective transitions involving new leaders, who act as cultural role models through their actions, enhance stability, boost employee morale, ensure retention of talent, and improve collaboration and accountability, leading to sustainable growth. Conversely, abrupt and mismatched changes by the new leader may breed resistance; erode trust, raises stress, and turnover, causing attrition and disengagement.

A compelling local example, providing a real-world canvas to analyze the tangible effects of leadership change, is the Community Based School, Karachi-established in 1965. Initially, it prospered but later the school entered a period of pronounced decline by the late 2010s. The quality indicators of this decline included the consecutive leadership transitions, decreasing enrolment of student,

declining academic performance, high rate of teacher turnover, and a negative reputation within the community. This downturn came to halt following the appointment of the Senior Principal in 2019, succeeding the former Principal.

Through a comparative lens, this study examines the tenures of both Principals to understand how a deliberate shift in leadership approach can catalyze institutional transformation through a moral purpose, inspiration, innovation and unity. The school's clear before-and-after leadership environment, well-documented internal reforms, and accessibility for qualitative inquiry lays a strong foundation for comparative analysis. Beyond documenting a local success story, this research engages with broader debates on leadership styles, types, and organizational culture (Emma, 2024; Cobbinah & Eshun, 2025; Fullan, 2002). It signifies that leadership transitions can accelerate cultural evolution or cause friction depending on leadership style and type. Effective leadership emerges from the alignment between vision, management, and contextual realities. It embodies a micro-level approach rooted in pedagogical innovation and relational trust, illustrating that sustainable improvement grows from the daily reculturing of learning environments.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

While international literature on educational leadership styles and their impact on school performance is well documented (Emma, 2024; Fullan, 2002), there remains a need for detailed, qualitative studies examining leadership transitions in underperforming schools in Pakistan. It is also observed that a confusion persists regarding distinctions between leadership styles (e.g., transformational, transactional) and leadership types (e.g., instructional, distributed), which causes potential hindrance in effective leadership development and evaluation (Cobbinah & Eshun, 2025). Practically, many schools in Karachi face decline without a clear, evidence-based understanding of the specific leadership behaviors and strategies that can catalyze a turnaround. Therefore, the study targets two core problems: (1) The Academic Gap: Missing deep, localized research on leadership-driven school improvement in Pakistan, (2) The Practical Need: A lack of evidence-based understanding of how to successfully implement and sustain new leadership styles to turn around struggling schools.

1.3 Research Questions

This study is based on the following research questions:

- 1) How was the leadership transition from the former Principal to the current Senior Principal enacted in practice, and how did stakeholders perceive and experience this change?
- 2) What administrative, academic, and cultural changes emerged under the Senior Principal's leadership, and how did these changes reshape the school's organizational functioning?

- 3) What outcomes and lessons can be derived from this leadership-driven transformation to inform evidence-based school improvement in comparable Pakistani school contexts?

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims:

- 1) To explore how the leadership transition was enacted and perceived by key stakeholders.
- 2) To identify and analyze the administrative, academic, and cultural changes that emerged under the Senior Principal's leadership and assess their impact on organizational functioning.
- 3) To derive evidence-based outcomes and lessons from the leadership-driven transformation to inform school improvement strategies in comparable Pakistani school contexts.

1.5 Justification of the Study

The justification for this study is threefold: Theoretically, it tests and potentially refines established leadership frameworks (Emma, 2024; Fullan, 2002) within a non-Western, resource-constrained setting, thereby assessing and enhancing their cross-cultural applicability. It also engages with the ongoing debate on leadership styles versus types (Cobbinah & Eshun, 2025). Practically, this study provides a well-documented success case of CBS with actionable strategies for educational administrators, policymakers, and school boards in Pakistan for an effective school turnaround. Moreover, for CBS, it serves as a formal record of its transformational journey, facilitating reflective practice. Methodologically, the study employs Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis framework for an in-depth qualitative exploration of complex perceptions and experiences, addressing a regional gap left by quantitative surveys.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study is limited to a private Community-Based School in Karachi, comparing the administrative period of decline preceding 2019 versus the subsequent period of institutional transformations post 2019. It explores leadership-driven change over a six-year period (2019 – 2025), acknowledging external factors (like policies, culture) as context. The participant pool includes 10 purposively sampled stakeholders to provide multi-perspective insights. The findings are specific to the participating school in Karachi and therefore, cannot be generalized to all private or public schools in Pakistan. However, it offers transferable insights for school administrators, researchers and policy makers for targeted interventions.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This research paper offers a threefold significance:

Theoretical Significance: This paper highlights an empirical case study of a private CBS from Karachi, Pakistan. Through a rich, contextualized narrative and grounded in leadership theories, this paper explains the dynamic interplay between leadership style, organizational culture, and collaborative performances.

Practical Significance: To foster positive change and promote leadership development programs, this paper shares actionable strategies and locally relevant material for school leaders in similar contexts.

Policy Significance: For education district officers and policymakers, this paper offers insights into the critical importance of strategic leadership appointments and sustained support required by principals for transforming underperforming schools.

1.8 Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are the potential weaknesses, which are beyond control, for example:

- 1) *Sample Size and Generalizability:* The small sample size of 10 purposively selected participants limits the generalizability of the findings.
- 2) *Retrospective Recall:* The accounts of the pre-2019 era as shared by the participants are subject to memory bias and the influence of subsequent experiences.
- 3) *Social Desirability Bias:* The study has considered the risk of social desirability bias by maintaining respondents' anonymity and including respondents from diverse categories like alumni and parents because the on-board staff may provide overly positive perceptions of the current leadership.
- 4) *Single-Case Design:* The findings are restricted to one Community-Based School of the urban context of Karachi, which limits the cross-context comparison.

Delimitations are the intentionally set conscious boundaries, such:

- 1) One specific school in Karachi.
- 2) Changed attributed to leadership and does not focus on broader socio-economic factors.
- 3) Qualitative research design with no independent quantitative data analysis.
- 4) Changes that occurred during 2019-present and does not assess the long-term sustainability of changes beyond this period.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of this study is drawn from several interconnected strands of literature focusing on educational leadership, its styles, and how it shapes the culture and performance of an organization.

2.1 Educational Leadership and its Impact on Culture and Performance

Leadership in educational settings is not one-size-fits-all approach; it varies significantly in styles and types, each with distinct implications for institutional effectiveness. Emma (2024) builds on the theoretical foundation laid by Burns (1978) and Bass (1995) to contrast transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership behavioural patterns. Transformational leadership creates a positive, collaborative culture through a shared vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Transformational leaders are the inspirers of change and innovation. This style is linked to higher teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and student outcomes (Hallinger, 2005). Comparatively, transactional leadership creates a structured, rule-based culture of rewards and punishments for performances tied to predetermined goals. While this behavioral pattern can ensure order and achieve short-term objectives, it promotes a compliance-oriented culture that may stifle creativity and long-term growth (Emma, 2024). Laissez-faire leadership, by contrast, is defined by minimal guidance and abdication of responsibility. It is a hands-off approach, which is effective for highly expert teams. However, the absence of leader often results in a fragmented culture, weak accountability, and inconsistent performance.

Theories of educational change (Fullan, 2002; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000) reinforce that while leadership principles such as vision, collaboration, and moral purpose are globally relevant, their implementation varies profoundly according to systemic and societal conditions. Educational leadership in the South Asian context often reflects deeply embedded hierarchical structures, limited teacher autonomy, and systemic resource constraints (Bryant et al., 2017). In Pakistan, the school principals often lack formal leadership training despite carrying significant administrative and instructional burdens (Nawab, 2011). Nevertheless, the role of an effective leader remains pivotal for enhancing school climate, student achievement, and teacher motivation (Leithwood et al., 2020). Sustainable school reforms, therefore, depends on effective educational leadership that promotes stakeholder engagement, transparency, and shared decision-making. Implementation of these practices promote collective ownership and are significant for long-term institutional improvement (Fullan, 2016).

Drawing on Emma's (2024) theoretical framework, this study offers a critical lens for examining the contrasting approaches of the previous Principal (largely transactional) and the current Senior Principal (predominantly transformational) in a private Community-Based School of Karachi.

2.2 Clarifying Leadership Constructs: Styles vs. Types

A critical issue in leadership discourse is the confusion between the terms: "styles" and "types." Cobbinah and Eshun (2025) argue that though these terms are often used interchangeably, but they have distinct constructs in meaning.

Leadership styles refer to how a leader leads – a leader’s innate, personal manner of influencing others. Styles are generally stable and rooted in personality traits (e.g., authoritarian, charismatic). Conversely, leadership types refer to what a leader can do, focusing on specific roles, functions, or theoretical models that can be adopted (e.g., instructional, distributed).

This study employs the theoretical lens of leadership styles (transformational versus transactional) as defined by Emma (2024) to understand the transition in operational leadership types from managerial/ administrative (former Principal) to instructional and distributed (current Senior Principal) at CBS. This distinction highlights how different styles from rewards and punishments to visionary leadership manifests changes to leadership functions and roles (type) and thus, impact organizational effectiveness.

2.3 The Principal as a Cultural Change Agent

Fullan (2002) analyzes the concept of instructional leadership, though important, as insufficient for driving deep, systemic reform. He advocates for the “Cultural Change Principal” to bring about sustainable change and argues that the leader must master the following five key components to make a deep, lasting cultural transformation:

Moral Purpose: A drive to bring about a systemic difference beyond one’s own school. It involves systemic thinking for improving all students’ lives and reducing achievement gaps.

Understanding Change: As change is messy, it is essential to expect transitional resistance and the implementation dip. It is better for the leader to focus on reculturing than restructuring.

Improving Relationship: The leader must build emotional intelligence and trust as the key foundation for progress.

Knowledge Creation and Sharing: Be the lead learner and model life-long learning, fostering professional learning communities for exchanging tacit and explicit knowledge.

Coherence Making: Develop focus by aligning fragmented efforts toward a shared vision.

This model is well exemplified through the current Senior Principal’s holistic approach, addressing not only academic outcomes but also fulfilling school’s social responsibilities. For Pakistani private schools, this case of CBS is exemplary and significant where leadership transition has catalysed modernization through digital adoption, curriculum restructuring, and enhanced accountability. Effective transitions, as Bridges (2009) argues in his research, require carefully managing endings, neutral zones, and new beginnings.

2.4 Leadership Development and Competency

The transformation observed at CBS aligns closely with contemporary perspectives on leadership and management development. Leadership development focuses on the use of soft skills like vision, inspiration, and building relationships, while management development focuses on hard skills like planning and budgeting. The 21st century requires a blend of both as exemplified at CBS.

Carbery and Garavan (2012) emphasize the importance of integrated learning strategies: experiential learning (learning by doing), job-based learning (learning through specific roles and challenges), and relationship-based learning (learning through mentorship and networks). Senior Principal's initiatives at CBS [e.g., establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) and formal mentorship programs] explicitly exemplify this integrated model. Her approach not only built her own capacity but was deliberately designed to cultivate leadership at multiple levels throughout the staff. Giving teachers the autonomy to lead PLCs and mentor peers, she created a distributed system of instructional leadership. This focus on capacity building across the organization is pivotal for sustainable improvement, as it ensures that change is not dependent on a single individual but embedded within the school's professional culture (Fullan, 2002). Ultimately, her succession planning reflects the integrated, human-centred, and developmental approach to leadership underscored by Carbery and Garavan (2012).

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

While extensive literature examining leadership transitions and institutional transformations in Western contexts are available, a notable and under researched gap is observed in qualitative, in-depth studies exploring leadership-driven turnarounds within Pakistani educational institutions. This study aims to address that gap by performing comparative analysis of leadership transitions in a purposively selected Community-Based School in Karachi. It employs reflexive thematic analysis of stakeholder perceptions to examine a concrete local case of institutional transformation triggered by administrative handovers between two Principals. The study integrates a synthesised theoretical framework on institutional transformation based on the complementary perspectives of:

- Emma's (2024) typology of transformational versus transactional leadership styles, which emphasises on how visionary and inspirational leadership approaches outperform compliance driven approaches in promoting adaptability.
- Cobbinah and Eshun's (2025) nuanced distinction between leadership styles and types, which emphasises that dialogic self-evaluation serves as a bridge for cultural alignment.

- Fullan’s (2002) model of the “Cultural Change Principal,” that focuses on the role of principals as moral agents, making coherence, building capacity and relationships and applying strategies to mitigate resistance.

Considering these perspectives, this contextualized study of Karachi explores how a transition from transactional to transformational leadership as exemplified by the Senior Principal at CBS focusing cultural change, can catalyze comprehensive improvement in academic culture, operational structures and employee welfare. This transformation is built upon data-driven improvement plans aligned with national standards and are strengthened by targeted professional development initiatives. These changes have evolved into essential sustainable standards driven by intensifying market competition, heightened parental expectations, and international performance indicators like those established by the OECD (2019).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A comparative, single-site case study design was used to qualitatively explore in-depth insights into stakeholder perceptions and lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as well as contrast the leadership approaches of two principals, pre-2019 and post-2019, within their real-life institutional setting (Yin, 2018).

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Purposive (criterion) sampling was used to select 10 key informants with direct experience of both leadership tenures. This technique helped in gathering rich, triangulated perspectives from all major stakeholders, including:

- The Current Senior Principal
- Three Academic Coordinators
- Two Classroom Teachers (with varying tenures)
- Two Parents
- One Senior Student
- One Alumna (who had direct experience under both leadership tenures).

3.3 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews followed by document review and non-participant observations for methodological triangulation and data richness.

Semi-structured Interviews: In-depth, semi-structured interviews included ten interviews, each lasting 25–35 minutes. Seven interviews were conducted in person at the school, while three were taken via WhatsApp to accommodate participants’ availability and accessibility. All sessions were audio-recorded with the participants’ prior informed consent, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate analysis. First pilot test was conducted to refine the interview protocol for

clarity and relevance. It involved two teachers having similar contextual experience but were not part of the target group (sample size). The interview protocol was organized thematically to guide discussions. It included an introduction that clearly defined the purpose of the study and assured confidentiality. This was followed by guiding questions for exploring changes in academics, administration, school culture, stakeholder engagement, as well as transition challenges that occurred during the two leadership tenures. It ended by allowing participants to share their final reflection.

Document Review: A systematic review of institutional documents was carried out to correlate insights with the interview data for improved triangulation. This included:

- Administrative circulars and policy memos.
- Staff attendance and professional development logs.
- Summaries of internal and board examination results.
- Annual academic plans and teacher training schedules.
- School newsletters and public communications.

Observations: Beyond document review and interviews, non-participant observations were also conducted over a period of two weeks during regular school hours and major events. The purpose of these observations was to ground self-reported data in tangible evidence of the school's operational culture. Observations focused on:

- The general school atmosphere and use of shared spaces.
- The implementation and use of digital management systems.
- The state and utilization of academic facilities (e.g., libraries, labs).

This multi-method approach allowed for a comprehensive, evidence-based exploration of the leadership transition and its institutional impact.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data gathered from CBS were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase framework of reflexive thematic analysis, which included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. After rigorous coding, sorting and sifting through the interview data, the emergent themes were continuously triangulated with evidence from the document review and field observations to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

During research, ethical guidelines were strictly followed to ensure the dignity, rights, and welfare of all participants. Written informed consent was obtained from each of the participant with full understanding of the study's purpose, procedures,

potential risks, and benefits. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured by protecting participants' identities and through data pseudonymisation. Participation was entirely voluntary and participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

All audio recordings, transcripts, and documents gathered during the study are stored securely in password-protected digital files and a locked physical cabinet. These will be retained until further guidelines from the institution, after which they will be destroyed to minimize harm. Being non-invasive, the interview protocol explicitly captured professional experiences and institutional processes. Participants had the freedom to decline any question or pause the interview at any time.

3.6 Researcher Positionality

As the principal investigator with a strong background in education, I consciously bracketed preconceptions regarding transformational leadership theories to remain open to emergent themes and maintained reflexivity through journaling while building trust with participants.

4. RESULTS ((THEMATIC FINDINGS))

This chapter presents findings from reflexive thematic analysis of interviews conducted with stakeholders at the Community-Based School following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase framework. Participants included the senior principal, three academic coordinators (AC1, AC2 and AC3), two classroom teachers (T1 and T2), two parents (P1 and P2), an alumna (A1), and a student (S1). Four central themes were generated that captured stakeholders' experiences and perspectives on leadership change over time. Verbatim data extracts are included to substantiate each theme.

Theme 1: A Shift from Transactional to Transformative-Holistic Education

This theme captures the definitive move from a narrow, exam-centric model to a broader commitment to holistic student development, creativity, and 21st-century skill acquisition.

Sub-theme 1.1: Beyond Bookworms: Fostering Holistic Development through Co-curricular Activities and Technological Integration

Stakeholders contrasted the past 'traditional learning' with the present emphasis on well-rounded growth. Academic Coordinator AC1 noted, "Earlier, the main focus was on the academics only... students were becoming bookworms, now there is holistic development." This is evidenced by expanded co-curricular activities, international competitions, societies, sports, and career guidance, which are central to student motivation and engagement. Alumna A1 highlighted, "Before the change in the leadership, the school environment was warm and happy, but a little

monotonous... accepting technology was not part of it... co-curricular activities were treated separately.” In recent years, Student S1 noticed a shift in the mindset and exclaimed, “Co-curricular activities now are part of the curriculum itself... technology is integrated in classrooms and home learning... students are more involved in community activities, robotics, STEM, and external competitions in collaborations with international agencies,” while Academic Coordinator AC1 listed “different contests” and platforms as evidence of this change. This was further supported by a Parent P1’s comment, “Children are motivated... today I have a cricket match, today I have a football match... so they want to go to school.”

The school has access to modern teaching resources, which is a structural strength of the institution. Academic Coordinator AC2 and Teacher T1 in their interviews talked about the adoption of “smart board[s] and smart TV” for videos, simulations, and group work, while the Senior Principal highlighted “institutional partnerships with global edtech programs” for skill development in Math and English. She highlighted, “We focused a lot on the involvement of students in cross-curricular activities because we believe that it has a direct impact on their academics and discipline.” Career guidance initiatives such as the “Rehnuma program” further positioned students as active participants in shaping their academic and professional futures.

Sub-theme 1.2: Data-Informed Pedagogy and Enhanced Teacher Ownership

Complementing the holistic shift, a data-driven approach to academic excellence has re-positioned teachers as active agents of change rather than passive implementers (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020). Academic Coordinator AC1’s interview emphasized a critical change. She detailed systematic “result analysis meetings” where teachers present their data, justify student outcomes, and plan strategies, fostering accountability and targeted intervention (Hargreaves, 2005). She exclaimed, “Teachers have become so active... they make their Excel sheets, do item analysis, and present the way forward.” Moreover, Senior Principal linked holistic engagement directly to academic performance, citing research showing that “increased number of societies and co-curricular activities... have impacted positively on their results.” This represents a sophisticated blend of formative engagement and summative rigor that has improved outcomes, with over 84% class averages and no failures in key subjects. The Alumna A1 affirmed, “Assessment has melted a bit... I don’t see ‘fail’ written; I see remarks for improvement. Differentiation techniques for low and high achievers are implemented.”

This theme reflects transformational leadership (Bass, 1990), instructional leadership, and professional learning community (PLC) theory, where the data-driven approach has fostered ownership, professional confidence, and the collective responsibility for student achievement. The growth mindset promotes

continuous, holistic development that extends beyond narrow academic outcomes.

Theme 2: The Architecture of Trust and Accessible Leadership

This theme encompasses the transformation in leadership style, stakeholder relationships, and communication protocols, characterizing the new leadership as approachable, transparent, and trust building.

Sub-theme 2.1: Friendly Environment and Eroded Hierarchies

The autocratic distance associated with past leadership was replaced by approachability. The three Academic Coordinators contrasted the past, where “there was fear while interacting with management,” with the present, “a friendly environment.” Alumna A1 confirmed, “Previously, leadership was very stern... they would not listen to the parent community. Now the leadership is more accessible to the students and to the parent community. Senior Principal is often seen in school grounds monitoring the processes.” Parents acknowledged that communication channels exist; however, they are largely appointment-based, which creates challenges for working parents, while the Senior Principal commented, “Leaders are expected to be available, to be a listening ear, but there are also systems and hierarchy that we follow.” This structured accessibility fosters psychological safety, as the Academic Coordinator AC1 recalled a head teacher being “inside the class” to support, creating a relaxed atmosphere where children “were sharing all their problems.”

Sub-theme 2.2: Structured, Transparent Communication Channels

Trust is built systematically through clearly defined communication protocols. Academic Coordinator AC1 explained streamlined processes for parental concerns like academic issues are handled by coordinators, management-related matters by head-teachers, and unresolved issues are escalated to the Senior Principal, “through proper appointments.” Similarly, Academic Coordinator AC2 highlighted the role of digital transformation in strengthening communication, noting the use of Google Classroom, email addresses, and WhatsApp to address what had previously been a “communication gap.” She further stated, “I have worked with many Heads and Principals... now there is systematic control and clarity.”

For the Senior Principal, building transparent communication was a primary challenge, essential for enabling stakeholders to “share their problems so that these could be resolved.” Reflecting on her continuous tenure, she explained, “Now with five to six years, I know parents, I know kids with their name, I know their journey, their history, and everything. So that has built trust among parents.”

Parents (P1 & P2) described earlier periods of frequent leadership change as disruptive, leading to weak relationships and uncertainty. Earlier, they were reluctant to approach the school because each time they visited; they encountered the new leadership and had to explain their concerns repeatedly. Long-serving staff

echoed these perceptions, contrasting earlier instability with the consistency of the current leadership.

Across all stakeholder groups, sustained leadership tenure became central to building relational trust. Leadership continuity enabled concerns to be addressed more effectively, reduced parents' hesitation to engage with the school, and fostered stronger relationships. Trust, therefore, emerged as a gradual, relational process rather than an automatic outcome of positional authority.

This theme aligns with relational leadership and trust-based leadership theories (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), which emphasize sustained interaction and relational stability as prerequisites for institutional trust. Furthermore, it also reflects bureaucratic leadership within distributed leadership systems (Spillane, 2006), where access is mediated through formal structures rather than informal, open door practices.

Theme 3: Strategic Empowerment and Professionalization of Teaching

This theme details the leadership's deliberate strategy to decentralize initiative and invest in professional development. Parents, teachers, academic coordinators, and leadership strongly emphasized improvements in teaching quality driven by continuous professional development (PD), structured curriculum frameworks, and system-wide policies. The expanded dataset strongly confirms that the professionalization of teaching is essential to leadership practice at the Community-Based School.

Sub-theme 3.1: Distributing Leadership and Valuing Voices

Decision-making has become more inclusive and distributed. Senior Principal described how teachers lead subject societies, and students spearhead initiatives. Teacher and parent feedback is actively sought and discussed. Academic Coordinator AC1 and Teacher T1 acknowledged that initiatives from parents or teachers are discussed in official meetings, highlighting that "the first platform is given" to the relevant domain expert. Alumna A1 further validated that "Student body is now engaged in decision-making... young entrepreneurs at open house. Their personal goals are becoming part of school policies." The centralized decision-making has brought structure and uniformity, especially in managing discipline and results.

Sub-theme 3.2: Investment in Continuous Professional Development

Senior Principal explained that "The institution has its own vision and mission... policies are described in such detail that personal impact is minimized." Empowerment is underpinned by significant investment in teacher growth. Academic Coordinator AC2, with decades of experience, highlighted ongoing learning from new techniques and affiliation with the National Examination Board. Structured support includes the subject-based training, induction courses, project-

based learning and technology integration programs. This was evident from the Teacher T2's interview: "Ma'am (Senior Principal) played a very positive role... she helped me in the transition from the previously taught Provincial Exam Board 1 requirements to that of the current National Exam Board 2." Similarly, Parents (P1 and P2) also recognized this, praising the school for emphasizing "the professional development of the teachers," which directly impacts teaching quality and students' achievements.

This theme aligns with distributed and instructional leadership, where leaders value stakeholders' needs and focus on strengthening teaching and learning through capacity building rather than direct control.

Theme 4: Navigated Challenges and Emerging Frontiers

Leadership narratives strongly emphasized inclusive education and ethical responsibility, particularly in relation to learning differences and emerging technologies such as AI. Leadership and senior academic staff consistently highlighted inclusive practices, ethical responsibility, and equity as defining features of current leadership. This theme reflects on the significant obstacles overcome during the leadership transition and identifies persistent and future-oriented challenges for the institution.

Sub-theme 4.1: Overcoming Foundational Discipline and Logistical Hurdles

The initial period under new leadership encountered acute challenges, including severe discipline issues in senior grades and logistical hurdles in starting an afternoon shift. Academic Coordinators AC1 and AC2 described a "worst condition" of discipline in grades 9-10, where teachers "were scared to go inside" certain sections. Overcoming this was a major achievement, as endorsed by the Senior Teacher T1, who, in her interview, explicitly connected discipline with better learning outcomes, demonstrating effectiveness in achieving core educational goals. Logistically, initiating the afternoon shift for senior grades involved starting "from scratch," with limited sections and space-sharing issues that Academic Coordinator AC1 identifies as an ongoing "resource issue" with venue dependencies between shifts.

Sub-theme 4.2: Contemporary Priorities: Equity, Ethics, and Environment

Current leadership attention has shifted to modern complexities. The ethical use of AI and technology was framed as a future challenge requiring a balance between innovation and values. Senior Principal emphasized the ethical integration of AI, running panel discussions on its "ethical use" to ensure it doesn't "kill that innovation and creativity." She also highlighted work on equity and inclusion, citing partnerships with Network of Organizations Working for People with Disabilities, Pakistan (NOWPDP) for teacher training, developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and supporting students with reading disabilities, a shift from a fixed mindset of a child being "weak" to one needing specific support. "We

designed a proper plan for her... individualized lesson plans... Ma sha Allah, she is performing so well.” Inclusion was framed as an institutional responsibility requiring diagnosis, teacher training, parental collaboration, and systemic support. Alumna A1 admitted, “Previously, values were embedded but unspoken... now honesty and ethics are spoken about openly. Even what was hidden and implied is now explicit.”

Furthermore, stakeholder perspectives reveal a tension between the transformative vision and persistent structural constraints. While leadership champions holistic, individualized development (Theme 1), the Alumna A1 pointed to enduring systemic hurdles, noting that “class size (40) is still the same... and students still struggle in English.” She advocated for language support to be “part of the routine, not one subject.” When discussed with the Senior Principal, she acknowledged these constraints as inherent to the school’s community-serving mandate, arguing that professional development is designed to equip teachers for large, diverse classes. This highlights a critical balancing act for leadership: advancing a transformative agenda while navigating immutable resource limitations and community expectations. The commitment to equity and inclusion is thus tested and operationalized within these very parameters.

Sub-theme 4.3: Systemic Resilience and the Paradox of Personalized Leadership

A critical analysis of Theme 2 reveals a potential paradox central to the school’s future sustainability. While systemic policies from the institutional leadership provide stability (Theme 3), the data indicate that the profound trust and relational capital, frequently cited as the bedrock of the new culture (Theme 2), are intimately tied to the sustained tenure and personal accessibility of the current senior principal. Stakeholders contrasted the disruptive “frequent leadership changes” of the past with the stabilizing “five to six years” of consistent leadership, which allowed the senior principal to know “parents... kids with their name... their journey” (see 2.2).

This presents a latent vulnerability: although the transformative model is now embedded within systems, it may remain disproportionately reliant on a specific leader-persona for its relational efficacy. This highlights the need to institutionalize trust and accessibility through deepened distributed leadership, aligning with the principles of sustainable leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

This theme aligns with ethical leadership and inclusive leadership frameworks, which prioritize equity, moral responsibility, and social justice in schooling.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings depict a shift from a traditional, transactional model towards a dynamic learning community with institutional values at Community-Based School, Karachi. The study discusses the findings in relation to well established

theories of educational leadership.

The Confluence of Transformational and Distributed Leadership

The fundamental shift towards holistic education (Theme 1) and the strategic empowering of staff (Theme 3) reflect Transformational Leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Senior Principal's articulation of a vision centered on student well-being and 21st-century skills inspired a move beyond narrow academic performance. This vision was operationalized through the expansion of co-curricular activities, the integration of technology, and data-informed pedagogy, which collectively redefined institutional success. Furthermore, teachers' active role in data analysis, decision-making, and leading initiatives exemplifies Distributed Leadership (Spillane, 2006), fostering professional ownership and embedding the transformational vision into daily practice.

Trust as the Foundation: Authentic Leadership in Action

The "Architecture of Trust and Accessible Leadership" (Theme 2) aligns with Authentic Leadership theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), which emphasizes transparency, self-awareness, and ethical relationship-building. The leadership's deliberate move from an autocratic, distant style to one of approachability and structured communication directly addressed a historical "trust deficit" linked to frequent leadership transitions. Sustained leadership tenure fosters deep relational capital; however, accessibility through formal protocols (such as appointments) complicates trust building at scale within an organized hierarchy.

Navigating Complexities: Strategic and Inclusive Leadership

The theme of "Navigated Challenges and Emerging Frontiers" (Theme 4) reflects strategic, situational, and ethical leadership. Navigating foundational challenges, including severe disciplinary issues, necessitated decisive and context-sensitive leadership. The current strategic emphasis on inclusion and AI ethics, conversely, demonstrates a sustained commitment to equity and moral responsibility. The proactive investment in teacher training for learning differences and forums on AI ethics illustrates how instructional leadership evolves to meet new frontiers. Importantly, the data suggest that while personalized leadership has been crucial, the concurrent strengthening of system-wide policies and professional learning communities (Theme 3) aims to build systemic resilience, reducing over-reliance on any single individual and promoting sustainable improvement (Fullan, 2016).

In summary, the transformation at the Community-Based School (CBS) embodies a multifaceted leadership model that intertwines transformational vision with distributed practice. Systemic change has been grounded in authentic trust and navigates future challenges with strategic inclusivity. Ultimately, the leadership narrative at CBS is one of evolution through consolidation, where enduring change is built on a foundation of shared vision, relational trust, and deliberate capacity building, reflecting Fullan's (2016) concept of "deep learning" within a

coherent system.

6. CONCLUSION

The study explores the impact of leadership transition at the Community-Based School, which explicitly demonstrates that the sustained leadership under the Senior Principal has catalyzed significant institutional transformation. The school has evolved from a rigid, transactional environment to one that strategically balances holistic development with data-informed academic rigor. Driven by a transformative, authentic, and distributed leadership style, a positive and engaged school community has evolved through trust, empowerment, and transparent systems. Leadership continuity, professionalized teaching practices, and student-centered initiatives have positively realigned the school's culture and outcomes. While structural challenges, such as resource limitations and large class sizes, persist, leadership demonstrates reflective and strategic awareness of these issues, as well as of emerging priorities like digital ethics and inclusion. The findings affirm that leadership transitions, grounded in shared vision, moral purpose and relational consistency, can serve as powerful catalysts for resilience, high performance and sustainable development.

Key Implications

- 1) Leadership continuity is fundamental for building trust and implementing long-term change.
- 2) Transformational goals are best achieved when paired with distributed leadership and structured professional empowerment.
- 3) A balanced focus on holistic development and academic rigor can coexist and be mutually reinforcing.
- 4) Future-focused leadership must proactively address ethical, inclusive, and technological frontiers.

6.1 Recommendations

Following are some actionable recommendations to strengthen the transformational gains and address the identified challenges:

For Private Community-Based School Leadership

- Strengthen distributed leadership practices by formalising teacher-led committees and student voice initiatives with clear mandates and resources.
- Develop a structured leadership succession plan to safeguard the transformative vision and trust-based culture.
- Develop flexible communication protocols (e.g., virtual meetings) to better accommodate working parents and strengthen stakeholders' engagement. This will help address the accessibility constraints noted in the findings.

- Expand partnerships with specialist organizations like NOWPDP to train all teachers in differentiated instruction and inclusive pedagogy. This will facilitate in creating learning environments that benefit every student, moving from targeted intervention to a school-wide Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework.
- Formalize policy and curriculum integration strategy for the ethical use of generative AI in teaching and learning. This will ensure creativity and critical thinking alongside harnessing technological innovation.

For Policymakers and Educators

- Design policies that inspire and support long-term leadership commitment in schools.
- Develop frameworks, generate funds and provide professional development to support integrated models that link co-curricular engagement and well-being to academic achievement.
- Invest in district-wide capacity-building programs to develop instructional leadership skills.

For Researchers

- Use a longitudinal study design to investigate long-term impact on tertiary education, career paths, and civic engagement of alumni of the holistic education model.
- Conduct a comparative case study of two different school with two different success rates in leadership transition to isolate the critical factors.
- Design mixed-methods research to substantiate the qualitative linkages proposed in this study empirically through quantitatively measured correlations between leadership initiatives and student outcomes.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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