

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP STYLES AND TEACHER JOB SATISFACTION: A MIXED-METHODS ANALYSIS IN URBAN SCHOOL SETTINGS

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Abstract

Teacher job satisfaction remains a critical factor influencing retention, commitment, and student outcomes, particularly in high-poverty urban school districts facing chronic staffing shortages. This mixed-methods study examines the relationship between principal leadership styles and teacher job satisfaction in urban educational settings. Drawing on established theoretical frameworks including Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Path-Goal Theory, and Transformational Leadership Theory the research investigates how different leadership approaches shape teachers' workplace experiences. Quantitative data from validated instruments such as the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) are integrated with qualitative insights into teachers lived experiences. The analysis explores transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, and distributed leadership styles, highlighting their respective impacts on intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction factors. Special attention is given to the unique contextual stressors of urban schools, including socio-economic challenges, resource scarcity, and high-stakes accountability. Findings underscore the pivotal role of supportive, transformational, and distributed leadership practices in enhancing teacher satisfaction, mediated by relational trust, psychological empowerment, and positive school climate. The study emphasizes the need for adaptive leadership that balances directive guidance with participative and individualized support. Practical implications for principal training, policy development, and urban school improvement are discussed, along with recommendations for future longitudinal research.

1. INTRODUCTION

The persistence of the teacher shortage crisis, particularly within high-poverty urban districts, has catalyzed an intensive scholarly focus on the organizational determinants of educator retention and morale. In these complex environments, the

school principal stands as the primary architect of school culture and the ultimate arbiter of the workplace climate (Khalifa, 2025). Teacher job satisfaction, defined as a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences, is not merely a

psychological benefit for the individual; it is a critical organizational outcome that predicts teacher commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and ultimately, student academic achievement (Kyriacou, 2023). Within urban school settings, characterized by systemic resource scarcity, socio-economic stressors, and high-pressure accountability frameworks, the influence of leadership styles on this satisfaction is magnified. This review examines the intricate relationship between principal leadership paradigms and teacher job satisfaction through a mixed-methods lens, synthesizing quantitative statistical correlations with qualitative narratives of lived experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2024).

2. Theoretical Foundations of Leadership and Satisfaction

To analyze the impact of leadership, one must first engage with the psychological and sociological theories that underpin employee motivation and relational exchange. These theories provide the conceptual scaffolding for understanding why

specific principal behaviors elicit varying degrees of satisfaction and commitment among urban faculty (Sutcher et al., 2024).

2.1. The Dual-Factor Framework: Motivation-Hygiene Theory

Frederick Herzberg’s Motivation-Hygiene Theory remains a cornerstone for assessing teacher job satisfaction. Herzberg’s fundamental contribution was the identification of a dual-continuum model where satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not opposites, but separate phenomena driven by different factors. In the educational sector, "motivators" (intrinsic factors) such as professional achievement, recognition for excellence, the nature of the work itself, and opportunities for advancement lead to true job satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959). Conversely, "hygiene factors" (extrinsic factors) like salary, administrative policies, the quality of supervision, and working conditions prevent dissatisfaction but do not inherently drive motivation (Ingersoll et al., 2026).

Table 1. Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Factors Applied to Educational Settings

Herzberg's Factors	Components in Education	Impact on Teacher Perception
Motivators (Intrinsic)	Recognition of teaching excellence, classroom autonomy, professional growth.	Drives engagement, commitment, and internal fulfillment (Pacia & Guevarra, 2023).
Hygiene Factors (Extrinsic)	Base salary, school infrastructure, administrative support, physical safety.	Prevents burnout and turnover; inadequacy leads to active dissatisfaction (Simply Psychology, 2018).

In urban settings, the principal often acts as a gatekeeper for both sets of factors. While a principal may have limited control over base salaries, they possess significant influence over the "supervision" and "recognition" hygiene and motivation factors (Ali, 2025). Recent studies indicate that hygiene factors, such as supportive administrative policies and interpersonal relationships with supervisors, are especially critical in urban schools because they mitigate the high-stress conditions inherent in these environments (Tecson & Malabo, 2025).

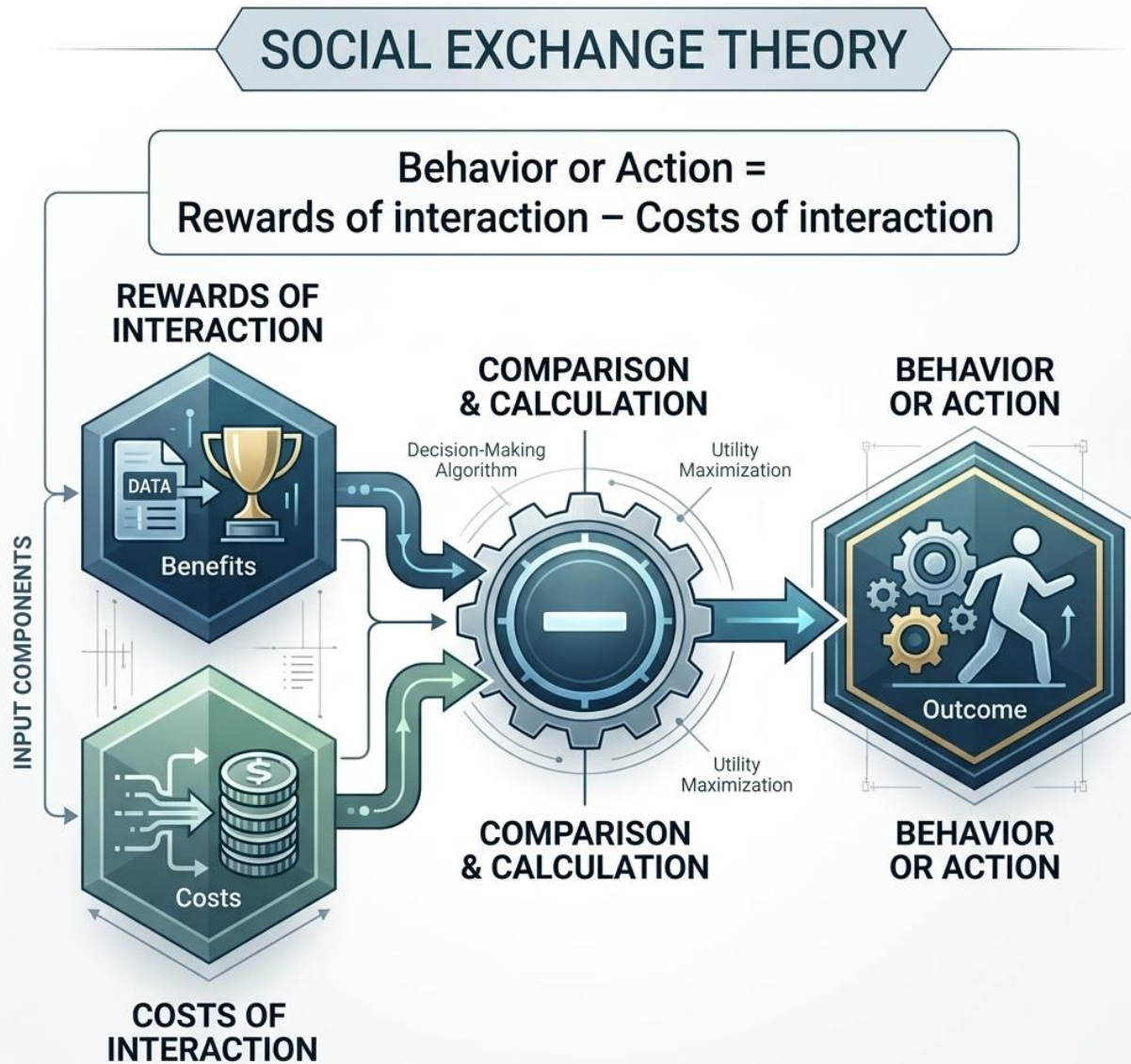
2.2. Social Exchange and Relational Trust

Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that interpersonal relationships are shaped by a cost-benefit analysis where parties exchange tangible and intangible resources. Within the principal-teacher dyad, teachers often provide "discretionary effort" going above and beyond their contractual duties in exchange for "social capital" provided by the principal, such as professional trust, emotional support, and recognition (Barnett, 2017).

Relational trust is a pivotal mediator in this exchange. When principals demonstrate high-quality exchange relationships, teachers respond with increased organizational loyalty and a willingness to stay in challenging urban schools.

This exchange is particularly vital in Title I schools, where the "costs" of the job such as exposure to community violence, student behavioral challenges, and excessive workloads are high (Allen, 2026).

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of Social Exchange Theory: The Cost-Benefit Analysis of Human Behavior and Utility Maximization.



2.3. Path-Goal Theory and Leadership Contingencies

Path-Goal Theory (PGT) suggests that the primary function of a leader is to clarify the path to organizational goals and remove obstacles for

subordinates. The effectiveness of the principal is contingent upon their ability to adapt their leadership style to the specific needs of the teacher and the nature of the task (Sims, 2024).

Table 2. Application of Path-Goal Leadership Styles in Urban Schools

Path-Goal Style	Core Behavior	Application in Urban Schools
Directive	Clarifies expectations, schedules work, and provides performance standards.	Beneficial for novice teachers or when implementing complex mandates (Saleem et al., 2021).
Supportive	Shows concern for teachers' well-being and fosters a friendly climate.	Critical for reducing stress and preventing burnout in high-poverty districts (Tecson & Malabo, 2025).
Participative	Consults with teachers and integrates their suggestions into decisions.	Enhances job satisfaction by empowering professional agency and identity (Saleem & Jabeen, 2025).
Achievement-Oriented	Sets challenging goals and demonstrates confidence in teacher ability.	Motivates high-performing staff to excel despite resource constraints (Saleem et al., 2021).

In urban educational management, PGT highlights the necessity of flexibility. Supportive leadership has been shown to have the strongest influence on staff involvement and communication in complex urban tasks (Pacia & Guevarra, 2023).

contexts, this vision often aligns with the intrinsic motivation of educators who serve disadvantaged communities (Brown, 2025).

3. Deconstructing Principal Leadership Styles

Contemporary research categorizes principal leadership into several archetypal styles, each with varying impacts on teacher satisfaction and school effectiveness (Blau, 1964).

- **Individualized Consideration:** This dimension is a significant predictor of teacher satisfaction. When a principal recognizes each teacher as an individual with unique professional needs, it fosters a cooperative environment (Jolley, 2016).

3.1. Transformational Leadership: The Catalyst for Empowerment

Transformational leadership is widely regarded as the most effective style for fostering a positive school culture and enhancing teacher morale. This style is characterized by the "four I's": idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

3.2. Transactional and Laissez-Faire Models: The Limits of Compliance

Transactional leadership operates on a system of "contingent reward" and "management by exception". While this style can maintain order, it often fails to inspire long-term commitment in high-turnover urban environments (Wasonga & Yohannes, 2021). Laissez-faire leadership, or the absence of leadership, is consistently linked to the lowest levels of satisfaction and high disengagement. In urban schools, where external stressors are constant, a principal who avoids decision-making leaves teachers feeling unsupported (Beyer, 2025).

- **Idealized Influence and Inspirational Motivation:** Principals who embody a clear, shared vision inspire teachers to commit to the school's mission. In urban

3.3. The Rise of Distributed and Distributive Leadership

Distributed leadership represents a departure from the "heroic" principal model, viewing

leadership as a collaborative practice shared among formal and informal leaders (Harris et al., 2025).

Table 3. Impact of Distributed Leadership Dimensions on Teacher Satisfaction

Distributed Leadership Dimension	Mechanism of Impact on Satisfaction	Empirical Evidence
Organizational Empowerment	Teachers feel a greater sense of ownership and professional identity.	Significantly enhances job satisfaction and reduces teacher stress (Polatcan, 2024).
Collaborative Decision-Making	Narrows the gap between administration and classroom, fostering community.	Correlated with improved student outcomes and teacher self-efficacy (Harris et al., 2025).
Professional Support	Resource sharing and mentoring reduce the isolation of the teaching role.	Linked to higher teacher engagement and retention (Polatcan, 2024).

Studies show that distributed leadership particularly benefits teachers in diverse settings due to its alignment with collaborative social expectations. However, if participation is perceived merely as an increase in administrative burden, it can lead to increased stress (Zhou et al., 2024).

4. The Urban Environment: Contextual Stressors and Risk Factors

Leadership in urban schools is uniquely challenged by the socio-economic and structural conditions of the surrounding community (Ali, 2025).

4.1. Socio-Economic Disparities and Student Risk

Urban students are more than twice as likely as suburban students to live in poverty (30% vs 13%). These economic realities translate into a set of "classroom challenges" that impact teacher morale, including higher exposure to neighborhood violence and safety hazards (NCES, 1996 ; Schonfeld & Feinman, 2012).

4.2. Structural Instability and Teacher Attrition

The "revolving door" of teacher turnover in urban districts creates a state of perpetual instability. Approximately 50% of urban teachers leave the profession within five years. Urban teachers identify specific stressors such as excessive workload, lack of resources, and perceived lack of administrative support as primary reasons for attrition (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).

5. Psychometric Measurement of Satisfaction and Leadership

The quantitative dimension of a mixed-methods analysis relies on validated instruments to measure latent constructs like satisfaction and leadership behavior (Obonyo, 2023).

5.1. The Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ)

The MSQ, developed, remains a gold standard for assessing job satisfaction. It exists in long-form (100 items) and short-form (MSQ-SF, 20 items) versions (Weiss et al., 1967).

Table 4. Psychometric Properties of the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ-SF)

MSQ-SF Factors	Primary	Included Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Intrinsic Satisfaction		Nature of the work, ability utilization, creativity, responsibility.	\$0.86\$ - \$0.90 (Weiss et al., 1967).
Extrinsic Satisfaction		Pay, company policies, supervision, advancement.	\$0.80\$ - \$0.85\$ (Weiss et al., 1967).
General Satisfaction		Composite score of all 20 items.	\$0.87\$ - \$0.93\$ (Weiss et al., 196).

5.2. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)

The MLQ is the most widely used instrument to measure transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. While statistically robust, mixed-methods studies find that MLQ scores must be supplemented by qualitative data to understand teacher perceptions, as some

"directive" behaviors may be valued in crisis-ridden urban settings (Sims, 2024).

6. Mediating and Moderating Variables

The path from leadership style to job satisfaction is frequently indirect, flowing through several psychological "levers." (Su-Keene et al., 2024).

Figure:1 Impact of Leadership Styles on Behavioral Outcomes



6.1. The Mediating Role of Trust and School Climate

Organizational trust functions as a "bridge" between leadership behavior and teacher outcomes. Principals' perceived trust by teachers is a significant mediator between leadership practices and the development of Professional

Learning Communities. A positive climate can buffer the negative effects of community violence exposure on youth and staff development (Wallace Foundation, 2021).

6.2. Psychological Empowerment and Self-Efficacy

Inclusive and transformational leadership styles indirectly influence teacher behavior by shaping internal psychological states. When school leaders

exhibit inclusive behaviors, they bolster teacher self-efficacy the belief in one's ability to handle various teaching challenges (Sindhushree et al., 2025).

Table 5. Key Mediating Levers for Enhancing Organizational Change

Potential Levers for Change	Mechanism	Contextual Importance
Organizational Health	Strongest predictor of stress and satisfaction.	Particularly significant in urban districts with high accountability (Su-Keene et al., 2024).
Inclusive Leadership	Mediates relationship between active teaching and performance.	Fosters cognitive development and teacher resilience (Sindhushree et al., 2025).

7. Institutional Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this mixed-methods analysis have profound implications for the recruitment and training of urban school leaders (Jolley, 2016).

7.1. Redefining the Principalship

Urban schools require "adaptive leadership training" where principals are trained to pivot between styles based on situational demands. Principals deliver results *indirectly* by enabling others to achieve more; therefore, a balance of investments in both principal and teacher development is required (Ali, 2025).

7.2. Strategic Management of School Culture

Effective principals promote better school environments through the strategic management of personnel and resources. This involves not only managing student discipline but also protecting instructional time and providing incentives that align with teacher motivations (Su-Keene et al., 2024).

7.3. Future Directions for Research

Despite the wealth of existing literature, significant gaps remain. Cross-sectional designs dominate, highlighting a critical need for longitudinal data to capture long-term effects on school personnel. Future studies should investigate the "chain of mediators" such as leadership, climate, and trust sequentially (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

8. Conclusions

This mixed-methods analysis has illuminated the significant influence of principal leadership styles on teacher job satisfaction within challenging urban school environments. The findings affirm that leadership is not merely an administrative function but a powerful determinant of teacher morale, retention, and overall school effectiveness. Transformational leadership, characterized by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, consistently emerges as a strong catalyst for enhancing intrinsic job satisfaction and fostering long-term teacher commitment. Similarly, distributed leadership practices that promote teacher empowerment, collaborative decision-making, and professional support contribute meaningfully to a positive school climate and reduced stress levels. In contrast, purely transactional or laissez-faire approaches tend to fall short in addressing the complex emotional and professional needs of urban educators, often resulting in higher dissatisfaction and turnover. The study further reveals that the effectiveness of leadership styles is heavily mediated by relational trust, psychological empowerment, and school organizational health. Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory remains highly relevant, demonstrating that while principals may have limited influence over extrinsic hygiene factors such as salary, they wield considerable power over motivators like recognition, autonomy, and professional growth

opportunities. Urban schools present a uniquely demanding context marked by socio-economic disparities, resource constraints, and elevated teacher attrition rates. In such environments, adaptive and supportive leadership guided by Path-Goal Theory becomes essential for clarifying expectations while simultaneously removing obstacles and providing emotional support. The integration of quantitative psychometric measures with qualitative narratives provides a richer understanding of how teachers perceive and experience leadership behaviors in high-pressure settings. The implications of this research are clear: principal preparation programs must move beyond traditional models to emphasize adaptive, relational, and distributed leadership competencies tailored to urban contexts. Policymakers and district leaders should prioritize creating conditions that enable principals to cultivate trust, empower teachers, and build resilient professional communities. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to better capture causal relationships and explore the “chain of mediators” linking leadership practices, school climate, teacher self-efficacy, and long-term retention. Ultimately, investing in effective principal leadership represents one of the most promising levers for improving teacher job satisfaction, reducing turnover, and enhancing educational equity and outcomes in urban school settings.

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