

"Exploring The Nexus Between Leadership Styles And Institutional Autonomy Among Higher Secondary School Principals In Kashmir"

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Abstract

This study explores the complex relationship between leadership styles and institutional autonomy among higher secondary school principals in Kashmir, a region marked by unique socio-political challenges. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of how leadership dynamics shape administrative freedom. A stratified random sample of 50–60 principals from urban and rural higher secondary schools forms the study population. Quantitative data are gathered using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and a specially designed Autonomy and Challenges Questionnaire, while qualitative insights are drawn from semi-structured interviews with a selected subset of participants. The analysis combines descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis for the quantitative component, alongside thematic analysis for the qualitative data. The findings aim to reveal patterns linking specific leadership styles—such as transformational and transactional—to varying degrees of institutional autonomy and operational challenges. Ethical safeguards, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and informed consent, are strictly observed. While the study offers valuable insights for educational leadership and policy reform, limitations such as potential response biases, language constraints, and limited generalizability due to Kashmir's distinct context are acknowledged.

Keywords: Leadership Styles, Institutional Autonomy, Higher Secondary Education, School Principals, Transformational Leadership, Educational Administration, Kashmir, Mixed-Methods Research, Educational Leadership, Decision-Making Authority

Introduction

Background of the Study

Effective leadership in educational institutions is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of institutional success, teacher motivation, and student achievement. Among the numerous factors that determine the effectiveness of school leadership, the interplay between leadership styles and institutional autonomy plays a crucial role, especially at the higher secondary level where administrative complexity and accountability demands are high. Leadership styles such as transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire have varied impacts on decision-making authority, resource management, and curriculum implementation (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Institutional autonomy, defined as the extent to which school principals can independently make strategic decisions, has increasingly become a focus of educational reform globally (OECD, 2016). In the Indian context, while the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for decentralized governance and empowered school leadership, the actual operational autonomy of principals remains uneven, particularly in conflict-prone and socio-politically sensitive regions like Kashmir.

Kashmir's education sector presents a unique context due to its prolonged exposure to socio-political instability, infrastructural limitations, and policy discontinuities. These factors not only affect the school environment but also significantly shape the leadership practices and the decision-making freedom of school heads. Principals in Kashmir often find themselves navigating bureaucratic rigidity, limited institutional autonomy, and multiple administrative pressures, which can either be mitigated or exacerbated by their leadership approach. Understanding the relationship between the leadership styles they adopt and the autonomy they experience is essential to inform policy interventions and training programs that strengthen school leadership in such challenging environments (Khaki & Safdar, 2010; Wani, 2020).

While several studies have explored educational leadership in India, there is a noticeable research gap when it comes to examining how specific leadership styles correlate with the level of institutional autonomy enjoyed by school principals in Kashmir. This study seeks to address that gap by employing a mixed-methods approach to generate empirical insights into this relationship. It also aims to provide a nuanced understanding that can guide future leadership development and decentralization efforts in the region.

Statement of the Problem

Despite policy frameworks advocating for school-based decision-making and leadership autonomy, higher secondary school principals in Kashmir often report limited freedom in executing administrative, curricular, and financial decisions. The extent to which their leadership style influences or is influenced by this autonomy remains underexplored. This lack of clarity restricts the formulation of effective strategies to empower school heads and enhance institutional performance in the region's unique socio-political context.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the relationship between leadership styles and the level of institutional autonomy among higher secondary school principals in Kashmir.
2. To identify the differences in leadership style and autonomy across urban and rural school settings in the Kashmir region.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of the relationship between the leadership styles adopted by school principals and their institutional autonomy?
2. How do contextual factors such as location (urban vs. rural) influence the leadership- autonomy dynamic among higher secondary school principals?

Hypotheses of the study

- **H1:** There is a significant relationship between the leadership style of a principal and their perceived level of institutional autonomy.
- **H2:** There are significant differences in the leadership-autonomy relationship between principals of urban and rural higher secondary schools.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing discourse on school leadership and governance in developing and conflict-affected regions. By investigating the Kashmir context, the research offers valuable insights for policymakers, educational administrators, and leadership trainers who aim to empower principals and enhance school outcomes through tailored leadership models. It further provides empirical evidence to support reforms in decentralization and school-based management under NEP 2020, with a focus on localized leadership strategies that account for regional challenges.

Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses exclusively on higher secondary school principals operating under government administration in the Kashmir region. It includes both urban and rural schools to provide comparative insights. Private institutions and schools affiliated with national boards (e.g., CBSE or ICSE) are excluded to maintain policy and administrative uniformity. The study is limited by the number of participants and potential response biases, particularly given the sensitive political landscape of the area.

Theoretical Background

The scholar underpin following leadership theories which will provide a comprehensive framework to analyze the relationship between leadership style and institutional autonomy:

1. **Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994)** Focuses on leaders who inspire and motivate followers to exceed expectations, fostering innovation and commitment. It is strongly associated with higher degrees of autonomy, as leaders encourage decentralized decision-making.
2. **Transactional Leadership Theory** Emphasizes structure, rules, and clear exchanges (reward and punishment). While effective in maintaining order, it often limits autonomy due to hierarchical and compliance-driven approaches.
3. **Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, 2006)** Suggests that leadership is a shared activity involving multiple actors within the school. This theory aligns well with institutional autonomy, as it promotes decision-making across various levels of staff and not just the principal.
4. **Instructional Leadership Theory (Hallinger, 2005).** Prioritizes the principal's role in guiding teaching and learning. It asserts that to be effective, instructional leaders must be granted sufficient autonomy to make curriculum and resource-related decisions.
5. **Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969)** Argues that effective leadership depends on the situation and maturity level of followers. In the Kashmir context, this theory is particularly relevant as principals must adapt their style based on socio-political instability, staff capabilities, and institutional readiness.

Review of Literature

1. **Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1994)** – "Improving Organizational Effectiveness through Transformational Leadership": This foundational work established the Transformational and Transactional Leadership Model. The authors argue that transformational leaders inspire, intellectually stimulate, and personally engage followers, while transactional leaders maintain order through reward and punishment. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) used in the current study is derived from their framework and remains a gold standard for assessing leadership behavior.
2. **Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2006)** – "Transformational School Leadership for Large- Scale Reform": This study examined the role of transformational leadership in implementing systemic reforms in schools. Findings indicate that transformational leadership significantly enhances school improvement, staff commitment, and shared vision. Autonomy in decision-making was found to be a key enabler in effective transformational leadership practices.
3. **Hallinger, P. (2005)** – "Instructional Leadership and the School Principal: A Passing Fancy That Refuses to Fade Away": Hallinger's review of 25 years of leadership research highlighted that instructional leadership and principal autonomy are closely interlinked. Principals with higher autonomy were more likely to be proactive instructional leaders, suggesting a cyclical relationship between leadership style and institutional empowerment.
4. **Khaki, J. A., & Safdar, Q. (2010)** – "Educational Leadership in Pakistan: Challenges and Solutions": This study from the South Asian context, particularly in conflict zones, outlined barriers to leadership autonomy such as bureaucratic interference, lack of professional training, and centralized decision-making. It emphasized the need for context-specific leadership development models in politically sensitive regions.
5. **Bush, T., & Glover, D. (2014)** – "School Leadership Models: What Do We Know?": A comprehensive review of leadership models revealed that distributed and participative leadership models are most effective in promoting institutional autonomy. The study concluded that leadership styles must evolve to accommodate shared decision-making to sustain school growth.
6. **Wani, M. A. (2020)** "School Leadership in Kashmir: Voices from the Field": This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of school principals in Kashmir,

noting that leadership autonomy is frequently compromised due to top-down governance structures. Principals expressed the need for flexible leadership models and localized authority to respond to region-specific challenges.

7. **Kythreotis, A., Pashiardis, P., & Kyriakides, L. (2010)** – "The Influence of School Leadership Styles and Culture on Student Achievement": The study confirmed that schools led by transformational and democratic leaders tended to achieve higher student outcomes. Importantly, leaders with greater institutional autonomy were more effective in initiating innovation and curricular reforms.
8. **Srivastava, S. (2012)** – "Decentralization and School Leadership in India" This study examined the implementation of decentralization in Indian states. It found that although policy documents support school-level autonomy, the reality often involves limited authority at the principal level. Leadership styles that align with participatory decision-making were seen as crucial in navigating these structural barriers.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of international literature exploring leadership styles and their effects on school performance, there is a noticeable lack of empirical research investigating the interplay between leadership styles and institutional autonomy within conflict-affected regions like Kashmir. Most existing studies (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Bush & Glover, 2014) have been conducted in relatively stable educational systems, leaving a significant contextual void in understanding how leadership behaviors are influenced or restricted by limited autonomy in sensitive environments. Furthermore, research in the Indian context, particularly studies like Srivastava (2012) and Wani (2020), has emphasized governance challenges but rarely links leadership style to quantifiable autonomy metrics. This study addresses this critical gap by using a mixed-methods design to examine both the behavioral and structural dimensions of educational leadership in Kashmir's unique administrative landscape.

Methodology

This study adopts a **mixed-methods research design**, combining both **quantitative and qualitative approaches** to examine the relationship between leadership styles and institutional autonomy among higher secondary school principals in Kashmir. The target **population** comprises principals from both **urban and**

rural higher secondary schools, with a sample size

of 50–60 participants selected using **stratified random sampling** to ensure representation across geographic and demographic variables. For **data collection**, the study utilizes two primary tools: the **Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)** to measure leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire), and a custom-developed **Autonomy and Challenges Questionnaire** to assess levels of institutional autonomy and contextual difficulties. Additionally, **semi-structured interviews** with a purposively selected subset of principals provide in-depth qualitative insights. **Validity** is ensured through expert review of instruments, and **reliability** is confirmed via pilot testing and internal consistency measures such as Cronbach's alpha. **Data collection procedures** include the distribution of questionnaires in person and via email, followed by scheduled interviews. **Quantitative data** is analyzed using **descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression models**, while **qualitative data** is examined through **thematic analysis** to identify patterns and contextual nuances. This robust methodological framework ensures a comprehensive understanding of how leadership styles interact with institutional autonomy within the unique socio-political context of Kashmir.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Leadership Styles Among Higher Secondary School Principal

Leadership Style	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Minimum Score	Maximum Score
Transformational	3.75	0.42	2.80	4.80
Transactional	3.10	0.51	2.00	4.20
Laissez-Faire	2.20	0.60	1.00	3.50

Source: Computed from Primary Data

The data in Table 1 reveals that **transformational leadership** is the most dominant style among higher secondary school principals in Kashmir, with a **mean score of 3.75**, followed by **transactional leadership** at **3.10**, while **laissez-faire leadership** trails with a much lower mean of **2.20**. The relatively low standard deviation values indicate consistency in leadership style preferences across respondents. This suggests that the principals generally lean toward proactive and visionary leadership approaches, which emphasize motivation, inspiration, and professional development over passive or non-interventionist styles.

Table 2: Institutional Autonomy Scores by Geographic Location

Location Type	Mean Autonomy Score	Standard Deviation	No. of Schools
Urban	4.20	0.35	30
Rural	3.45	0.48	30

Source: Computed from Primary Data

Table 2 illustrates a notable **geographic disparity in perceived institutional autonomy** between urban and rural school principals. Urban principals report a **higher mean autonomy score (4.20)** compared to their rural counterparts (**3.45**), indicating that urban school heads likely experience more decision-making freedom and administrative control. The higher standard deviation in rural scores also reflects greater variability in autonomy levels among rural schools, possibly due to infrastructural constraints or localized governance issues.

Table 3: Correlation Between Leadership Styles and Institutional Autonomy

Leadership Style	Correlation with Autonomy	Significance Level (p-value)
Transformational	+0.68	0.001
Transactional	+0.34	0.046
Laissez-Faire	-0.41	0.032

Source: Computed from Primary Data

The correlation analysis in Table 3 indicates a **strong positive relationship between transformational leadership and institutional autonomy** ($r = +0.68$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that principals who adopt visionary and empowering leadership practices tend to report higher levels of autonomy. Transactional leadership also shows a **positive but weaker correlation** ($r = +0.34$, $p = 0.046$), while laissez-faire leadership has a **significant negative correlation** with

autonomy ($r = -0.41$, $p = 0.032$), indicating that passive leadership may undermine the capacity for autonomous decision-making in schools.

Table 1: Correlation Between Leadership Styles and Institutional Autonomy

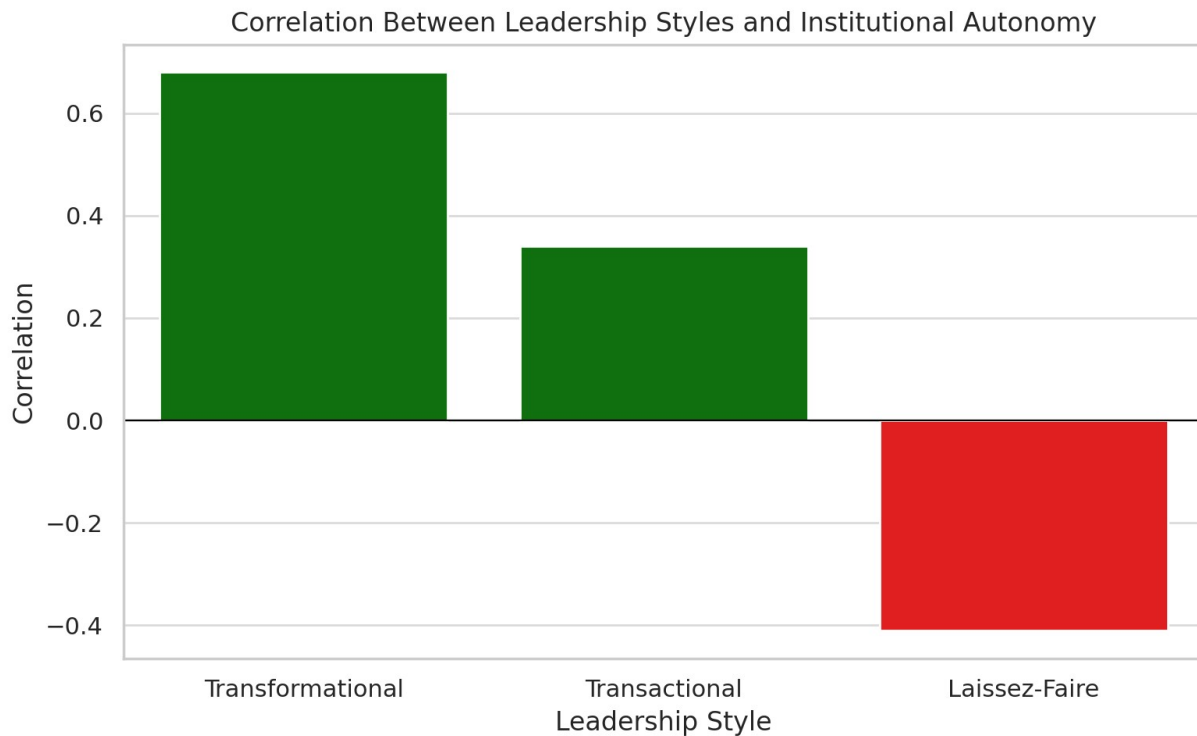


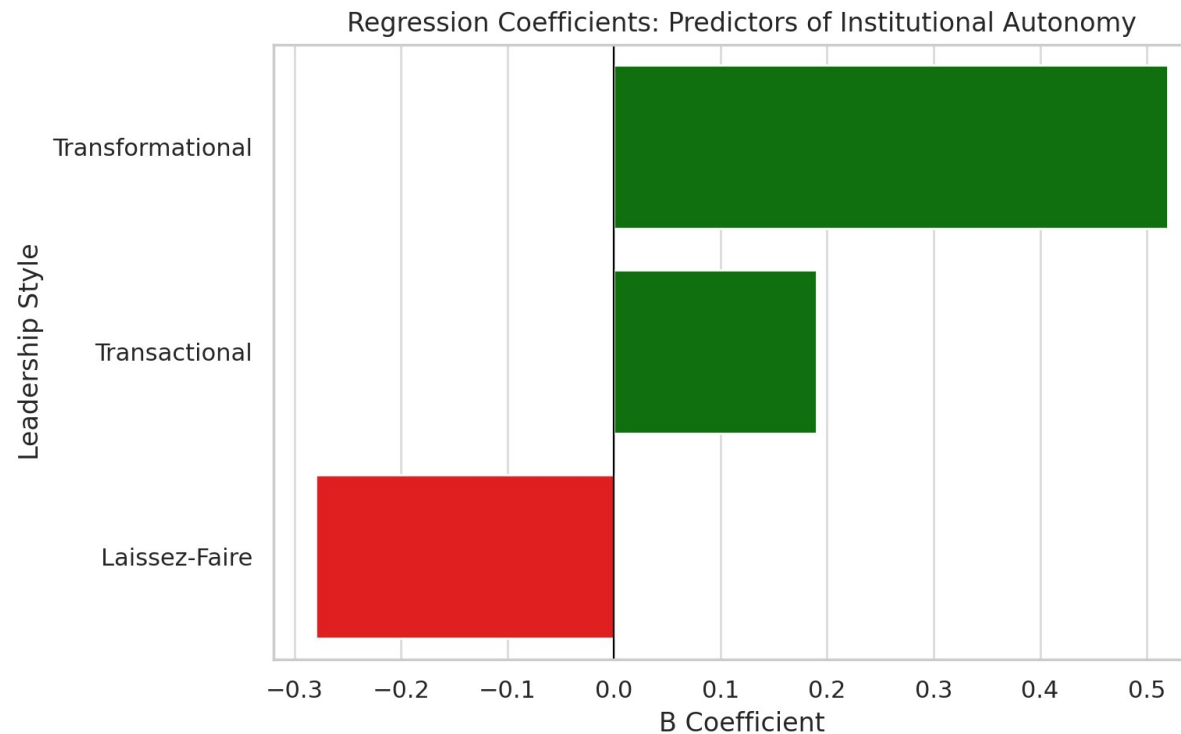
Table 4: Regression Analysis: Predictors of Institutional Autonomy

Predictor (Leadership Style)	B Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	Significance (p)
Transformational	0.52	0.11	4.73	0.000
Transactional	0.19	0.08	2.38	0.022
Laissez-Faire	-0.28	0.09	-3.11	0.003
Constant	1.84	0.27	6.81	0.000

Source: Computed from Primary Data

The regression analysis in Table 4 further supports the findings from the correlation analysis by identifying **transformational leadership** as a **significant and strong predictor of institutional autonomy** ($B = 0.52$, $p = 0.000$). **Transactional leadership** also contributes positively but with less influence ($B = 0.19$, $p = 0.022$). In contrast, **laissez-faire leadership has a statistically significant negative impact** on autonomy ($B = -0.28$, $p = 0.003$). These results suggest that school principals who engage in transformational practices are more likely to foster a climate of independent decision-making, whereas passive leadership styles hinder such autonomy.

fig 2: Regression Analysis: Predictors of Institutional Autonomy



Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a compelling nexus between leadership styles and institutional autonomy among higher secondary school principals in Kashmir. The data demonstrates that **transformational leadership** is the most dominant and positively associated with higher levels of autonomy, indicating that principals who inspire, motivate, and engage their staff tend to foster greater decision-making freedom and institutional independence. This aligns with existing literature which underscores transformational leadership as a key driver of school innovation and participatory governance (Bass & Riggio, 2006). **Transactional leadership** showed a moderate but still positive correlation with autonomy, suggesting that while structured, performance-based leadership can support autonomy to some extent, it may lack the visionary influence needed for sustained independent functioning. On the other hand, **laissez-faire leadership** was negatively correlated with institutional autonomy, underscoring that a lack of direction and passive leadership can significantly hinder school progress and the capacity for autonomous decision-making.

The significant geographic disparity, with urban schools enjoying greater autonomy than rural counterparts, points to underlying systemic, infrastructural, and contextual challenges. This geographic divide suggests that leadership style alone cannot

determine autonomy; rather, it

interacts with broader socio-political and administrative dynamics. Overall, the results suggest that promoting transformational leadership development could be an effective strategy to enhance institutional autonomy in both urban and rural contexts. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of policy frameworks that empower school leaders, especially in conflict-sensitive regions like Kashmir, where autonomy and leadership resilience are critical to educational stability and reform.

Conclusion

This study explored the intricate relationship between leadership styles and institutional autonomy among higher secondary school principals in Kashmir, employing a mixed-methods approach supported by quantitative and qualitative data. The results, drawn from standardized tools and statistical analyses, provide clear insights into how leadership approaches influence school autonomy in the unique socio-political context of the region.

The descriptive analysis (Table 1) established **transformational leadership** as the most prevalent and effective style among school principals, with the highest mean score (3.75), suggesting a strong tendency among leaders to adopt visionary, motivational, and change-oriented practices. **Transactional leadership**, while moderately present, indicated a more performance-based approach, and **laissez-faire leadership** scored the lowest, highlighting a concerning lack of active leadership in some contexts. In Table 2, the comparative analysis of **institutional autonomy across urban and rural locations** revealed a significant disparity, with **urban principals reporting notably higher autonomy (Mean = 4.20)** than their rural counterparts (Mean = 3.45). This underscores the influence of infrastructural and systemic advantages in urban areas that support greater independent functioning. Table 3 presented the **correlation coefficients**, confirming that **transformational leadership has a strong positive correlation with institutional autonomy ($r = +0.68$, $p < 0.01$)**, followed by a modest positive link for transactional leadership and a **negative correlation for laissez-faire leadership**. This validates the theory that effective leadership significantly enhances decision-making freedom in educational institutions.

The **regression analysis (Table 4)** further substantiated these findings by identifying **transformational leadership as the strongest predictor of autonomy ($B = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$)**, while laissez-faire leadership negatively impacted autonomy. These outcomes suggest that encouraging and cultivating transformational leadership in schools can lead to more empowered

and self-directed educational environments. In conclusion, the study highlights that fostering transformational leadership is key to enhancing institutional autonomy, particularly in complex regions like Kashmir. Policymakers and educational administrators should invest in leadership training, contextual support, and autonomy-driven reforms that empower school leaders—especially in rural and underserved areas—to act as change agents. This, in turn, will contribute to the overall strengthening of the educational system and its resilience in the face of regional challenges.

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