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The Effect of Empowering Leadership on Teachers' Organizational Commitment: The Mediating Role of Trust in Leader

Güçlendirici Liderliğin Öğretmenlerin Örgütsel Bağlılığı Üzerindeki Etkisi: Lidere Güvenin Aracılık Rolü

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ABSTRACT: Although various leadership styles influencing teachers' organizational commitment have been extensively examined, the mediating mechanism of trust in leaders within the empowering leadership framework has received limited empirical attention, particularly in centralized and hierarchical education systems. This study investigates the direct and indirect effects of empowering leadership on teachers' organizational commitment, emphasizing the mediating role of trust in leaders. A cross-sectional research design was utilized, involving 694 high school teachers from ten provinces that reflect the regional diversity of Türkiye. Participants responded to previously developed and validated scales adapted into Turkish measuring empowering leadership, trust in leader, and organizational commitment. Structural equation modeling (SEM) results indicated that empowering leadership positively predicted both trust in leaders and organizational commitment, while trust in leaders partially mediated the relationship between empowering leadership and organizational commitment. These findings suggest that empowering leadership enhances teachers' organizational commitment primarily by fostering trust-based and participative relationships. The study contributes to leadership and organizational psychology literature by clarifying the role of trust as a psychological mechanism linking empowerment-oriented leadership behaviors to organizational attachment. Furthermore, the findings offer practical implications, indicating that leadership development programs should prioritize trust-building competencies alongside the promotion of empowerment practices to strengthen organizational commitment within centralized educational systems.

Keywords: Empowering leadership, organizational commitment, trust in leader, teacher, mediation analysis.

ÖZ: Öğretmenlerin örgütsel bağlılığını etkileyen çeşitli liderlik tarzları kapsamlı biçimde incelenmiş olsa da, güçlendirici liderlik çerçevesinde liderlere duyulan güvenin aracılık mekanizması, özellikle merkezi ve hiyerarşik eğitim sistemlerinde sınırlı biçimde araştırılmıştır. Bu çalışma, güçlendirici liderliğin öğretmenlerin örgütsel bağlılığı üzerindeki doğrudan ve dolaylı etkilerini, liderlere duyulan güvenin aracılık rolüne odaklanarak incelemektedir. Türkiye'nin bölgesel çeşitliliğini yansıtan on ilden 694 lise öğretmeninin katılımıyla kesitsel bir araştırma deseni uygulanmıştır. Katılımcılar, güçlendirici liderlik, lidere güven ve örgütsel bağlılık düzeylerini ölçen daha önce geliştirilmiş ve Türkçe'ye uyarlanmış geçerli ve güvenilir ölçekleri yanıtlamıştır. Yapısal eşitlik modellemesi sonuçları, güçlendirici liderliğin hem lidere güveni hem de örgütsel bağlılığı pozitif yönde yordadığını; ayrıca lidere güvenin bu ilişkiye kısmen aracılık ettiğini göstermiştir. Bulgular, güçlendirici liderliğin güven temelli ve katılımcı ilişkileri teşvik ederek öğretmenlerin örgütsel bağlılığını güçlendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırma, güçlendirmeye dayalı liderlik davranışlarını örgütsel bağlılığa bağlayan psikolojik bir mekanizma olarak güvenin rolünü açıklığa kavuşturarak literatüre katkı sağlamaktadır. Ayrıca, liderlik geliştirme programlarının örgütsel bağlılığı artırmak için güven oluşturma yeterliklerine öncelik vermesi önerilmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Güçlendirici liderlik, örgütsel bağlılık, lidere güven, öğretmen, aracılık analizi.

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Teacher performance is influenced not only by knowledge, skills, and experience but also by teachers' attitudes toward the school. Among these attitudes, organizational commitment reflects teachers' dedication to their professional roles and institutional goals. More broadly, organizational commitment refers to employees' psychological attachment to their organization, shaping their motivation and retention (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Given its critical role in achieving educational objectives, organizational commitment has become an increasingly significant research focus across disciplines (Hulpia et al., 2012; Kılınç et al., 2022; Özdemir et al., 2024). However, most of these studies have been conducted in decentralized or participatory systems, where teachers are granted substantial professional agency. In highly centralized education systems, such as Türkiye's, the dynamics of commitment are more structurally constrained and demand leadership approaches that foster relational rather than positional authority (Kondakçı & Beycioğlu, 2020).

In addition, Türkiye's centralized administrative structure and collectivist cultural norms have been shown to negatively impact teachers' organizational commitment, weakening their sense of belonging and diminishing their professional motivation (Limon, 2022). In this context, understanding the impact of school leaders' leadership styles on organizational commitment emerges as a critical research priority (Polatcan et al., 2024). Particularly within Türkiye's highly centralized and hierarchical education system, empowering leadership (EL) practices become crucial as they offer a potential means to compensate for teachers' limited autonomy and participation in decision-making processes. Unlike transformational or instructional leadership models that rely heavily on organizational vision and performance expectations, EL operates by delegating authority and encouraging participation through trust. This makes it particularly functional in environments where rigid hierarchies limit teacher voice (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Lee et al., 2018). Importantly, examining this relationship in Türkiye is not merely a replication of prior leadership–commitment studies but rather a critical test of theoretical boundaries in a centralized, high power-distance, and collectivist cultural setting, where structural and cultural constraints may alter established dynamics.

This study aims to enhance educational leadership literature by examining the impact of leadership behaviors on organizational commitment (OC) and the mediating role of trust in this relationship. Recent studies have increasingly focused on the impact of organizational commitment on school reform and administrative practices (Bellibaş et al., 2024; Dou et al., 2017; Hulpia et al., 2012; Kandemir, 2025; Kılınç et al., 2022). Previous research in educational leadership and management (EDML) has explored the effects of leadership styles such as distributed leadership (Hulpia et al., 2009; Hulpia et al., 2012), authentic leadership (Rego et al., 2013), transformational leadership (Geijsel et al., 2003; Khasawneh et al., 2012; Ross & Gray, 2006), and instructional leadership (Bellibaş et al., 2024; Hallinger et al., 2018) on organizational commitment.

From a comparative perspective, transformational leadership emphasizes articulating a compelling vision, inspiring collective goals, and motivating through individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation (Marks & Printy, 2003). Empirical evidence consistently shows that transformational leadership is positively associated with OC across diverse contexts, including Israel (Zadok & Benoliel, 2023), Jordan (Khasawneh et al., 2012), Canada (Ross & Gray, 2006), and Türkiye (Kılınç et

al., 2022). These studies highlight that transformational leadership fosters commitment both directly and indirectly, sometimes contingent upon contextual factors such as motivational climate or trust in principal. Cross-cultural evidence further indicates that leadership effectiveness varies with system structures and cultural norms (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013). In contrast, EL focuses on autonomy, participatory decision-making, and shared influence, which may be particularly functional in centralized education systems (Kasapoğlu Tankutay & Çolak, 2025).

In recent years, EL has gained prominence as a leadership approach that grants employees greater autonomy, encourages participation in decision-making, and supports individual development. EL fosters employee autonomy enhances engagement in organizational processes, and promotes professional growth (Konczak et al., 2000). While various leadership styles have been studied in relation to teacher commitment, EL is distinct in that it directly addresses the structural limitations often encountered in hierarchical school systems by fostering trust and shared influence (Kim & Beehr, 2017). While existing studies recognize the positive impacts of various leadership styles on teacher commitment, the specific indirect mechanisms through which EL affects organizational commitment, particularly through trust in leader (TL), have not been systematically examined, especially within centralized educational systems (Tuti & Özdemir, 2024).

Despite its theoretical importance, empirical research on EL in educational settings remains scarce. Although previous studies emphasize the positive influence of leadership on teacher behaviors in schools (Hulpia et al., 2012; Ma et al., 2024; Özdemir et al., 2026), limited attention has been paid to the direct relationship between EL and OC (Özdemir et al., 2024). This is also consistent with recent evidence showing that EL influences teacher outcomes both directly and indirectly through mediating mechanisms (Özdemir et al., 2026). Moreover, research suggests that the impact of leadership on teacher commitment is often mediated by various psychological mechanisms rather than exerted directly. This is consistent with prior research demonstrating that leadership processes influence teacher outcomes through mediating variables such as psychological empowerment and affective commitment (Yao et al., 2020). Consistent with this perspective, recent findings indicate that EL exerts both direct and indirect effects on teacher outcomes through intermediary processes (Özdemir et al., 2026). Despite this growing body of evidence, no study has systematically tested the mediating role of TL in the relationship between EL and OC within Türkiye's highly centralized education system, although some studies have explored the role of leadership and trust in centralized or hierarchical contexts (Dou et al., 2017; Kılınç et al., 2022).

One of the key mediating variables in this relationship is TL (Alazmi & Hammad, 2023; Kavgacı, 2024; Khan, 2023). Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) conceptualize trust as a willingness to accept vulnerability to another party, grounded in the expectation that the other will act with positive intent and integrity. Their integrative model identifies three core antecedents: ability, benevolence, and integrity. These dimensions collectively shape individuals' perceptions of a leader's trustworthiness. In educational contexts, this framework provides a useful lens for understanding how school leaders can foster trust, which in turn can strengthen teachers' organizational commitment, particularly in systems where formal autonomy is limited. Despite its

relevance, the mediating role of TL between EL and OC remains underexplored in the literature. While research in educational leadership and management (EDML) has examined various moderating variables influencing OC (Akdeniz & Korkmaz, 2023; Kavgacı, 2024; Kılınç et al., 2022), studies focusing specifically on mediating factors are still limited. The present study addresses this gap by proposing and testing a mediation model in which TL functions as a key psychological mechanism linking EL to OC in the Turkish educational context. By doing so, it aims to clarify how EL might operate as a compensatory leadership style in institutional contexts where formal autonomy is limited but relational trust can still be cultivated.

Accordingly, this study contributes originality by situating an established leadership–commitment framework within a centralized and collectivist educational system. Prior research in Israel (Zadok & Benoliel, 2023), Jordan (Khasawneh et al., 2012), Canada (Ross & Gray, 2006), and Türkiye (Kılınç et al., 2022) consistently shows that transformational leadership strengthens teacher organizational commitment. However, these studies also indicate that leadership effectiveness depends on structural and cultural conditions (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013). By focusing on EL in Türkiye's centralized and collectivist system, the present study goes beyond replication and provides a critical test of model generalizability. It demonstrates how systemic constraints and cultural orientations may alter the mechanisms of leadership effectiveness, offering a theoretical extension of leadership–commitment research within a distinctive governance and cultural context. Building on this contribution, future research should examine other potential mediating mechanisms across broader and more diverse educational contexts. In light of these identified research gaps, this study is directed by the following research questions:

1. To what extent does EL influence OC?
2. To what extent does TL mediate the relationship between EL and OC?

This study aims to offer a distinctive contribution to the field of education. Recently, there has been increasing emphasis on the critical role of teachers in school development (Muijs & Harris, 2003). Teacher commitment is essential for fostering professional learning communities and supporting teachers' professional development (Alazmi & Hammad, 2023; Ma et al., 2024). However, teachers' ability to assume active roles in school processes remains limited in many contexts, highlighting the need for leadership practices that promote autonomy and participation (Kılınç et al., 2022; Yorulmaz et al., 2018). In this regard, although reforms have been initiated to enhance teacher professional learning, there remains a pressing need for leadership practices that strengthen teacher commitment. Beyond its academic contribution, the study offers a framework for school administrators aiming to strategically manage human resources in rigid governance systems. By focusing on psychological mechanisms such as trust, it provides actionable insights for improving staff motivation and organizational cohesion (Okçu et al., 2025**;** Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

EL practices, by promoting trust and supporting shared decision-making, provide an important pathway to strengthen teacher agency even in highly centralized education systems like Türkiye. Accordingly, this study seeks to offer policy recommendations for enhancing teacher commitment and fostering trust in school leadership. Previous studies have underscored the influence of different leadership styles on enhancing teacher commitment, indicating that EL particularly promotes

teachers' sense of participation and autonomy (Hulpia et al., 2012; Pazetto et al., 2024). However, few studies have systematically investigated the mediating role of TL in this relationship. By addressing this gap within the framework of EL, the present study aims to contribute meaningfully to the EDML literature on educational leadership and management. Beyond the educational context, the findings also offer broader insights into the psychological mechanisms linking leadership, trust, and organizational behavior, thereby contributing to the fields of organizational psychology and strategic human resource development.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing upon Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985), this study posits that EL enhances OC through the mediating role of TL. Social Exchange Theory suggests that relationships in organizations are built on reciprocal exchanges; when leaders empower employees, they foster a sense of obligation and loyalty among followers (Burke et al., 2007; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the fulfillment of basic psychological needs, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are supported through EL behaviors (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). These theoretical perspectives provide a solid framework for understanding how EL builds trust and commitment in educational settings. Building on previous theoretical and empirical studies (Akdeniz & Korkmaz, 2023; Hulpia et al., 2012; Kandemir, 2025; Kılınç et al., 2022; Konczak et al., 2000; Özdemir et al., 2024), this study argues that EL positively affects OC and that TL acts as a critical psychological mechanism mediating this relationship. Unlike most prior studies that examined direct effects, the current model proposes a specific psychological pathway through TL, thereby offering a process-oriented explanation of how EL shapes teacher commitment (Kim & Beehr, 2017). Accordingly, the key concepts are elaborated below within the framework of the proposed model.

Organizational Commitment

Teachers' organizational commitment (OC) is a critical factor in achieving school goals and is widely examined in educational leadership research. Morrow (1983) defines OC as an individual's adherence to their organization, embracing its goals and values. In this study, Allen & Meyer's (1990) Three-Component Model of Organizational Commitment is adopted, framing OC as a psychological contract between individuals and their organizations. The model comprises three dimensions: affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment. Affective commitment denotes an employee's emotional attachment to and identification with the organization, whereas continuance commitment represents the perception that departing from the organization would result in considerable economic or social costs (Meyer et al., 1993). Normative commitment, on the other hand, describes an employee's moral obligation to remain within the organization (Konan & Çelik, 2018). In the educational context, OC is a key determinant of school effectiveness (Liu & Bellibaş, 2018). Research indicates that teachers with high OC are more involved in school decision-making processes (Kushman, 1992) and provide greater support to disadvantaged students. Moreover, highly committed teachers contribute to a learning-friendly school environment and exert more effort to enhance student achievement (Firestone, 1996).

Although the three dimensions of organizational commitment are theoretically distinct, this study treated OC as a higher-order composite construct, and the overall scale score was used in the analyses.

Empowering Leadership and Organizational Commitment

Empowering leadership (EL) is a leadership approach that fosters employees' decision-making autonomy by delegating authority and responsibility, thereby encouraging their participation in organizational processes (Konczak et al., 2000). Amundsen and Martinsen (2014) define EL as a leadership style that enhances employees' sense of responsibility, helps them find meaning in their work, and OC. This study adopts the Empowering Leadership Model (ELM) developed by Konczak, Stelly, and Trusty (2000) within the framework of three core dimensions: delegation of authority, referring to granting employees decision-making power; accountability, encouraging employees to take greater initiative in work processes; and supportive leadership, providing motivation and guidance for professional development (Konan & Çelik, 2018).

From a Social Exchange perspective, empowering behaviors signal trust and respect from leaders to subordinates, prompting reciprocal positive attitudes such as greater commitment (Burke et al., 2007; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Additionally, through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, EL behaviors fulfill teachers' psychological needs, reinforcing their motivation and emotional attachment to the organization (Lee et al., 2018; Özdemir et al., 2026). This is particularly salient in centralized education systems like Türkiye, where EL may serve as a compensatory mechanism for the lack of structural teacher autonomy (Kondakçı & Beycioğlu, 2020). Nevertheless, its implementation presupposes that principals themselves possess adequate authority and discretion to delegate tasks, make context-specific decisions, and allocate resources effectively.

In the Turkish centralized system, principals are appointed through a standardized examination process and operate under strict bureaucratic regulations, which restrict their ability to exercise discretion (Kandemir, 2025; Kılınç et al., 2022). These structural constraints shape the scope and influence of EL, limiting its capacity to strengthen teacher autonomy, self-efficacy, and organizational commitment. Moreover, features of Türkiye's centralized and collectivist culture, such as high-power distance, limited autonomy, and expectations of hierarchical compliance, may alter how EL and trust interact in shaping teacher commitment (Kondakçı & Beycioğlu, 2020). This suggests that investigating EL in this context provides a critical test of theoretical boundaries rather than a replication of previous findings.

To represent Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory more fully, future studies could extend the model by incorporating additional constructs. From a Social Exchange perspective, perceived organizational support has been shown to strengthen the link between leadership and commitment by shaping reciprocity expectations. From a Self-Determination perspective, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and motivational climate are central mechanisms through which EL enhances trust and commitment (Lee et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 1985). Evidence from educational research further supports the relevance of these constructs, indicating that

their inclusion would provide a more comprehensive representation of the underlying theoretical models.

H1. EL has a direct and significant effect on OC.

The Mediating Role of Trust in Leader

Trust in leader (TL) reflects employees' positive expectations regarding their leader's decisions, actions, and intentions (Tuti & Özdemir, 2021). It includes emotional acceptance of the leader's intentions, cognitive confidence in their competence, and a willingness to be vulnerable in the organizational relationship (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). According to Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman's (1995) integrative model, trustworthiness is grounded in perceptions of a leader's ability, benevolence, and integrity, which collectively shape employees' willingness to accept vulnerability.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) emphasizes that trust is fundamental for leadership effectiveness, fostering open communication, collaboration, and commitment. EL promotes autonomy and involvement, which, through reciprocal social exchange processes, strengthen perceptions of leaders' trustworthiness (Freire & Fernandes, 2016; Lee et al., 2018). Social Exchange Theory suggests that empowering behaviors enhance trust by fulfilling obligations of fairness and respect, while Self-Determination Theory argues that supporting autonomy and competence builds relational trust. Hence, EL is expected to foster TL.

H2. EL has a significant positive effect on TL.

TL, in turn, is a key driver of OC. Trust promotes a sense of psychological safety, encouraging teachers to invest more deeply in organizational goals and relationships. Research shows that a trust-based leader-employee interaction fosters collaboration and strengthens teachers' psychological attachment to their schools (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Kılınç et al., 2022). When leaders are perceived as trustworthy, teachers are more likely to internalize organizational goals and values, enhancing their commitment.

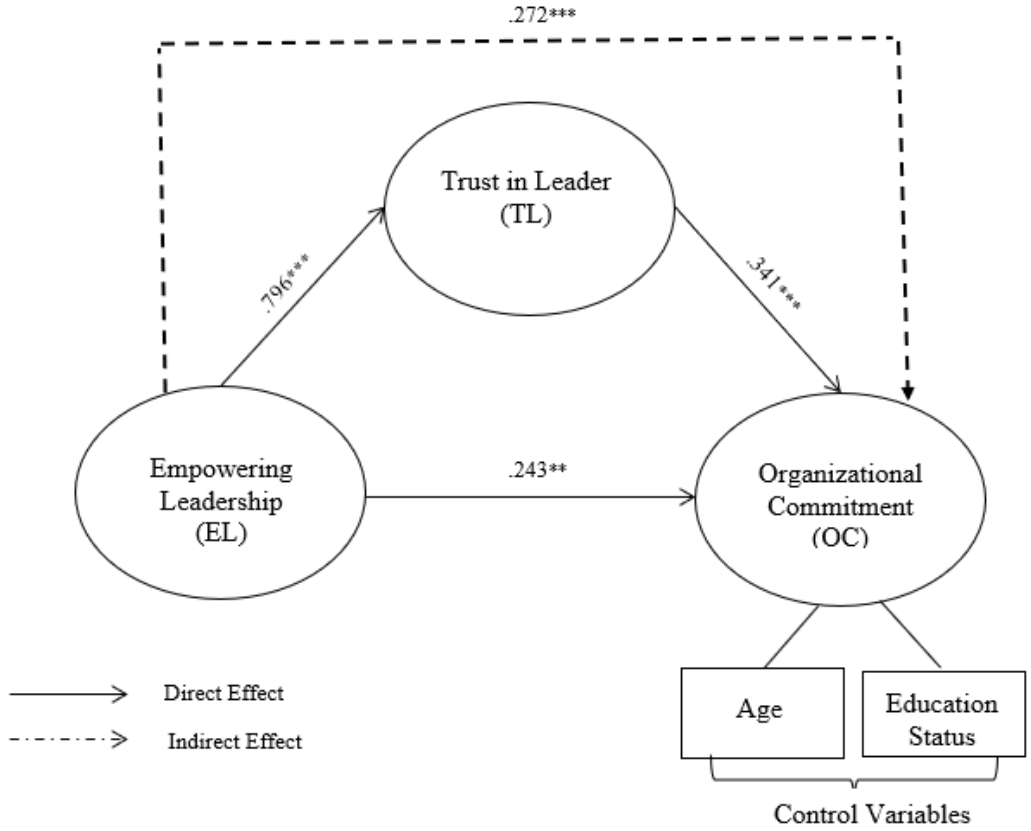
H3. TL has a significant positive effect on OC.

Building on these theoretical foundations, it is proposed that TL mediates the relationship between EL and organizational commitment (Ryan & Deci, 1985). EL satisfies psychological needs and initiates social exchanges that build trust, which in turn promotes commitment. By granting autonomy, expressing confidence in teachers' capabilities, and supporting their development, empowering leaders meet teachers' basic needs for competence and relatedness, which fosters greater trust (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). Thus, TL functions as a critical intermediary mechanism.

H4. TL significantly mediates the relationship between EL and OC.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model



Note. Standardized coefficients (β) are reported. Solid lines indicate direct effects; the dashed line indicates the indirect effect (EL → TL → OC). Indirect effect = β = .272, p < .001; total effect = β = .515, p < .001, indicating partial mediation.

This model proposes that EL has a direct effect on OC (H1). It further assumes that EL strengthens TL (H2), which positively influences OC (H3). In this framework, TL functions as a mediator between EL and OC (H4). Age and education status are incorporated as control variables to account for individual-level differences.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative cross-sectional approach to investigate the relationships EL, TL and OC. A relational survey design was employed to examine the direct and indirect associations between the study variables. In addition, the proposed mediation model was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM), which enables the simultaneous examination of multiple relationships among latent constructs while accounting for measurement error (Kline, 2023). SEM provides a comprehensive analytical framework to assess both the direct and indirect effects within a single model and to evaluate the overall fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data. Given the cross-sectional design of the study, causal inferences cannot be definitively established.

Sample and Procedure

The target population of the study consists of teachers working in public high schools in Türkiye. The study was conducted in public high schools across ten provinces representing different regions of Türkiye. A two-stage sampling process was followed. First, three regions (central, eastern, and western) were selected to capture geographical variation and reflect socioeconomic and cultural diversity. This classification was informed by Türkiye's NUTS Level 1 regional framework used by the Turkish Statistical Institute, but the 12-region structure was simplified into three broader geographical categories for the purposes of this study (TSI, 2023). In the second stage, teachers working in public high schools within these regions were invited to participate through convenience sampling (Cohen et al., 2005). A total of 60 public high schools were accessed through existing institutional contacts and formal permission procedures, which facilitated data collection within accessible settings. Convenience sampling was preferred due to limited field access, institutional permission procedures, and time and resource constraints. Participants were required to have worked at the same school for at least one year and to participate voluntarily. Data were collected through in-person distribution of survey forms at schools, which ensured direct contact with participants and enhanced data quality. The survey forms were administered by the researchers following a standardized procedure, including providing the same instructions to all participants, ensuring voluntary participation, and collecting responses under similar conditions.

The required minimum sample size was 284, based on a 5% margin of error and a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. The sample size was determined using a standard sample size estimation approach based on these statistical criteria (Cohen et al., 2005). Ultimately, 708 responses were collected, and after excluding incomplete forms, 694 valid responses were retained for analysis. Ethical approval was secured from the appropriate institutional review board. All participants were clearly informed about the study's objectives, their voluntary involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage, and written informed consent was collected accordingly.

Although convenience sampling was adopted due to logistical constraints, which limits representativeness, the findings provide valuable context-specific insights from the participating schools. However, the use of convenience sampling and voluntary participation may introduce potential biases, such as self-selection bias and regional imbalance. To mitigate these risks, data were collected from multiple regions and a relatively large sample size was obtained, which enhances the robustness of the findings. A pilot study with 13 high school teachers was conducted to assess the clarity and relevance of the survey instrument, leading to minor wording adjustments. No additional validity or reliability analyses were conducted at this stage.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (n=694)

Categories	*n*	*%*
Gender		
Male	306	44.1
Female	388	55.9
Age		
≤30	134	19.3
31-40	260	37.5
41-50	190	27.4
50 >	110	15.9
Educational level		
Collage	498	71.8
Master, PhD	196	28.2
Seniority		
≤ 10	274	39.5
11-20	212	30.5
21-30	158	22.8
31 >	50	7.2
Total	694	100

Source(s): Created by author(s)

The sample consists of 694 teachers, with a slightly higher proportion of female participants (55.9%). The majority of participants are between the ages of 31 and 40 (37.5%) and hold a bachelor's degree (71.8%). In terms of professional experience, most teachers have 10 years or less seniority (39.5%), indicating a relatively early- to mid-career sample.

Measures

Organizational Commitment (OC).

In this study, organizational commitment was used as the dependent variable, measured through the Organizational Commitment Scale (OCS) developed by Allen and Meyer (1990) and adapted into Turkish by Han et al. (2018). The scale assesses employees' commitment across three dimensions: affective commitment (6 items), reflecting an employee's emotional attachment to the organization (e.g., "This institution is very meaningful to me."); continuance commitment (6 items), referring to the perceived economic and social costs of leaving the organization; and normative commitment (6 items), capturing the moral obligation felt toward the organization. The OC scale was rated on a five-point Likert-type response format ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." In the adaptation study, the Cronbach's α reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.87, while in this study, it was found to be 0.82. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results confirmed the validity and reliability of the

scale, with the following fit indices: χ^2/df = 2.14, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.94, and SRMR = 0.03, indicating a good model fit.

Trust in Leader (TL).

Trust in leader was used as an independent variable, measured through the Leader Trust Scale (LTS) developed by Tuti and Özdemir (2021). The scale assesses teachers' trust in their administrators with a unidimensional structure (e.g., "My administrator always treats me fairly"). The Likert-type items of the TL Scale were rated on a five-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The original study reported Cronbach's reliability coefficient of 0.91, while in this study, it was 0.98. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) results indicated a good model fit (χ^2/df = 1.89, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.03), confirming the scale's validity and reliability.

Empowering Leadership (EL).

Empowering leadership was used as another independent variable, measured through the Empowering Leadership Scale (ELS), originally developed by Konczak et al. (2000) and adapted into Turkish by Konan and Çelik (2018). The scale consists of three dimensions: delegation of authority, which evaluates employees' involvement in decision-making (e.g., "My administrator provides me with opportunities to make important decisions"); encouraging responsibility, which assesses the extent to which employees are motivated to take on additional responsibilities; and support and development, which examines administrators' role in employee growth and motivation. The Empowering Leadership scale was rated on a five-point Likert-type response format ranging from "Never" to "Always." The original study reported Cronbach's coefficient of 0.89, while in this study, it was 0.94. The CFA results demonstrated a good model fit (χ^2/df = 2.45, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, SRMR = 0.04), indicating that the scale is a valid and reliable instrument for assessing leadership behaviors in Turkish educational organizations. All scales underwent a rigorous back-translation process to ensure linguistic and conceptual validity. A panel of 3 experts reviewed the translations, and a pilot test confirmed clarity and comprehension.

Control Variables

Age and educational level were included as control variables, as prior studies indicate their potential influence on OC (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Wang et al., 2024). Age was treated as a continuous variable, while educational level was coded as bachelor's degree = 0 and master's degree = 1.

Analytical Approach

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed in Mplus 8.8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) employing the maximum likelihood estimation method. Given the nested data structure (teachers within schools), a multilevel SEM (ML-SEM) approach was employed to account for between-school variance. A random-intercept model was specified with EL and TL as Level 1 predictors and OC as the outcome variable. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for OC was 0.042, justifying the multilevel analysis. Model fit indices indicated acceptable fit (χ^2/df = 2.38, RMSEA = 0.044, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.93, $SRMR_{within}$ = 0.028, $SRMR_{between}$ = 0.042).

Results supported the hypothesized model: EL significantly predicted TL (γ = .78, p < 0.001), which in turn predicted OC (γ = .34, p < 0.001). The indirect effect was significant, confirming partial mediation after controlling nested structures. The direct effect of EL on OC remained significant after including TL in the model, indicating partial mediation. The indirect effect was tested using a bootstrap resampling method with 5,000 iterations, and the results indicated a statistically significant indirect effect, confirming partial mediation after controlling for nested structures.

Preliminary statistical assumptions were met: skewness and kurtosis values were within ±1.5, and no multicollinearity was detected (VIF < 5, TI > 0.10). CFA confirmed measurement validity with strong fit indices (χ^2/df < 3, RMSEA < 0.08, SRMR < 0.08, CFI > .90, TLI > 0.90). Reliability (α, ω > 0.70), convergent validity (AVE > 0.50, CR > .60), and discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) were all established.

Common method variance (CMV) was addressed through procedural remedies, including anonymity, temporal separation of variables, and varied response formats. Harman's single-factor test indicated no major threat (24.8% variance explained). To minimize social desirability bias, participants were assured of anonymity, voluntary participation, and the absence of right or wrong answers. While self-report data may still carry minor social desirability effects, procedural controls were applied to reduce this risk (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Ethical Procedures

The study was approved by the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Trabzon University (protocol number E-81614018-050.04-2400051111, dated October 14, 2024).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Preliminary analyses were conducted to assess reliability (Cronbach's α), descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), and bivariate relationships (Pearson correlation coefficients) among the study variables (see Table 2).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables

Variables/Values	*M*	*SD*	*α*	*1*	*2*	*3*
1. Empowering Leadership (EL)	3.84	0.81	0.946	1	–	–
2. Organizational Commitment (OC)	3.16	0.54	0.771	0.565**	1	–
3. Trust in Leader (TL)	3.90	0.98	0.985	0.825**	0.590**	1
Skewness	–	–	–	-1.03	-0.27	-1.02
Kurtosis	–	–	–	0.76	0.66	0.59
TI	–	–	–	1.00	1.00	–
VIF	–	–	–	1.00	1.00	–

Abbreviations: α, Cronbach's alpha coefficient (reliability coefficient); M, mean; SD, standard deviation; TI, tolerance index; VIF, variance inflation factor.
***$p < 0.001$.

Source(s): Created by author(s)

As shown in Table 2, all variables and factors have reliability coefficients above 0.60, indicating acceptable internal consistency of the measurement scales. Values above 0.60 are considered acceptable, particularly in exploratory research contexts (Hair et al., 2019). The mean values of the variables range from 3.16 to 3.90, while standard deviations vary between 0.54 and 0.98, suggesting a moderate level of dispersion. The highest mean value corresponds to TL, whereas the lowest belongs to organizational commitment. Correlation analysis reveals a significant positive relationship between EL and TL (r = 0.825, $p < 0.001$) and between EL and OC (r = 0.565, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, TL and OC are positively and significantly correlated (r = 0.590, $p < 0.001$). Based on conventional thresholds, these correlations can be interpreted as moderate to strong (Cohen, 1988). The strongest correlation is observed between EL and TL (r = 0.825, $p < 0.001$), while the weakest but still significant correlation is between TL and OC (r = 0.590, $p < 0.001$).

Structural Model

After the correlation analyses, SEM was applied to estimate the associations among the variables. The findings, along with the path coefficients, are illustrated in Figure 2. Model fit indices were assessed to evaluate the adequacy of the model. Following commonly accepted criteria (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2023), values of $\chi^2/df \leq 3$, RMSEA ≤ 0.08, CFI and TLI ≥ 0.90, and SRMR ≤ 0.08 indicate acceptable model fit. The structural model exhibited a satisfactory fit to the data, as indicated by the following values: χ^2/df = 2.73, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, and SRMR = 0.05.

Findings indicate that EL has a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect on TL (β = 0.796, SE = 0.038, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.721, 0.871]), explaining 68% of its variance (R^2 = 0.689). Additionally, EL has a significant direct positive effect on OC (β = 0.243, SE = 0.050, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [0.145, 0.341]). Together, EL and TL explain 39% of the variance in OC (R^2 = 0.392). TL also significantly and positively influences OC (β = 0.341, SE = 0.041, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.260, 0.422]). Accordingly, H1, H2, and H3 were supported.

To strengthen the robustness of the findings and address the nested nature of the data (teachers within schools), a multilevel structural equation modeling (ML-SEM) analysis was conducted using Mplus 8.8. A random-intercept model was specified, and the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for OC was 0.042, supporting the use of multilevel modeling. Consistent with recommended thresholds (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2023), RMSEA ≤ 0.08 and CFI/TLI ≥ 0.90 indicate good fit in multilevel models. Model fit indices indicated a good fit (χ^2/df = 2.38, RMSEA = 0.044, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.93, $SRMR_{within}$ = 0.028, $SRMR_{between}$ = 0.042). The pattern of relationships remained consistent: EL significantly predicted TL (γ = 0.78, $p < 0.001$), which in turn significantly predicted OC (γ = 0.34, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect was significant, confirming the partial mediation of TL even after accounting for clustering effects.

Mediation Analysis

To test H4, the mediating effect was examined using bootstrap resampling (5,000 iterations) with bias-corrected confidence intervals within the ML-SEM framework, controlling for age and education level. The model's fit indices were consistent with the previously reported values: $\chi^2/df = 2.73$, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, SRMR = 0.05, confirming a good fit with the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The model results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Standardized Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects with Confidence Intervals

	Product of coefficients				95 % Bootstrap CI	
	Estimate		SE	Sig. (*p*)	Lower	Upper
Standardized direct effects						
Age	→OC	0.128	0.025	**	0.079	0.177
Education Status	→OC	0.088	0.050	*	-0.010	0.186
EL	→OC	0.243	0.050	**	0.145	0.341
EL	→TL	0.796	0.038	***	0.721	0.871
TL	→OC	0.341	0.041	***	0.260	0.422
Standardized total indirect effect						
EL	→OC	0.272	0.048	***	0.178	0.366
Standardized total effect						
EL	→OC	0.515	0.030	***	0.456	0.574
$R^2 = 0.689$						

Abbreviations: EL, empowering leadership; TL, trust in leader; OC, organizational commitment.
***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.
Source(s): Created by author(s)

The findings indicate that the indirect effect of EL on OC via TL was statistically significant and positive ($\beta = 0.272$, SE = 0.048, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.178, 0.366]). The indirect effect of EL on OC accounted for approximately 52% of the total effect. Furthermore, the total effect of EL on OC was found to be strong and positive ($\beta = 0.515$, SE = 0.030, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.456, 0.574]). EL explains 68% of the variance in TL ($R^2 = 0.689$), while EL and TL together account for 39% of the variance in OC ($R^2 = 0.392$). These results confirm the mediating role of TL in the relationship between EL and OC. The significance of indirect effects and mediation was evaluated using bootstrapping procedures, which are widely recommended for testing mediation effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the association between EL and OC, with particular attention to the mediating role of TL. Findings from the SEM analysis demonstrated a significant relationship between EL and OC, indicating that TL serves as a partial mediator in this linkage. These results corroborate previous empirical evidence emphasizing the essential role of organizational trust in fostering employee commitment (Kılınç et al., 2022).

First, EL was found to enhance OC. By fostering participation in decision-making, EL reinforces professional commitment. Specifically, empowering school leaders who delegate authority and responsibility encourage professional growth and engagement in organizational processes (Kim & Beehr, 2017). Previous studies support the direct impact of EL on commitment (Kandemir, 2025; Kasapoğlu Tankutay & Çolak, 2025; Özdemir et al., 2024; Özdemir et al., 2026). This finding can be theoretically grounded in Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that employees reciprocate leaders' supportive and fair behaviors with increased trust and heightened organizational commitment. EL creates a sense of obligation and loyalty by offering autonomy and development opportunities.

Second, findings confirm that TL is a key determinant of OC. Trust strengthens teachers' sense of belonging, motivation, and active participation in organizational processes (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Ross & Gray, 2006). Furthermore, teachers with high trust in their leaders demonstrate greater effectiveness and openness to innovation (Polatcan et al., 2024). Recent research also indicates that trust-based leadership processes contribute to broader professional outcomes, including instructional improvement and professional development (Yalçın et al., 2025). From a Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977) perspective, EL enhances teachers' self-efficacy beliefs by trusting them with decision-making authority, which in turn increases their commitment and engagement.

Third, the results indicate that EL enhances OC through TL, reinforcing the importance of organizational trust in fostering employee commitment (Kılınç et al., 2022). In educational settings, trust promotes teacher involvement in decision-making and innovation (Dou et al., 2017; Khan, 2023), supporting previous research emphasizing its role in employee engagement (Alazmi & Hammad, 2023; Ma et al., 2024). Consistent with recent findings, EL has been shown to operate through psychological and relational mechanisms, shaping various teacher outcomes beyond direct effects (Özdemir et al., 2025; Özdemir et al., 2026; Yao et al., 2020; Yenel et al., 2025). This mediation effect is particularly relevant in centralized systems like Türkiye, where teachers' autonomy is structurally limited. EL acts as a compensatory mechanism, fostering trust and mitigating the rigidity caused by hierarchical control. However, unlike in decentralized systems where principals have greater discretionary authority over staffing, budgeting, and instructional decisions (Pont et al., 2008), Turkish school leaders operate under rigid bureaucratic constraints that may limit the scope of empowering practices. This structural differentiation should be considered when interpreting the findings and evaluating their relevance across different national contexts. In line with this, research conducted in China and India demonstrates that, although both operate under centralized governance systems, trust and autonomy function as key mediating mechanisms through which leadership influences teacher outcomes (Khan, 2023; Yin et al., 2013).

Building on this perspective, while prior studies have highlighted the role of trust in centralized systems, none have systematically examined the mediating role of TL in the relationship between EL and OC within Türkiye's centralized and collectivist educational context. This study addresses this gap by providing a boundary test of theory in a setting where teachers' formal autonomy is structurally constrained, thereby offering a context-sensitive contribution to the educational leadership literature.

Consistent with this argument, EL explained 68% of the variance in TL. This substantial effect is not merely sample-specific but reflects the structural and cultural dynamics of Türkiye's centralized and collectivist system, where empowering practices are scarce yet highly valued. Similar patterns have been observed in other hierarchical contexts such as China and Jordan (Dou et al., 2017; Khasawneh et al., 2012). Accordingly, the high explanatory power represents a critical boundary test of theory, highlighting how systemic constraints can amplify the role of EL in shaping trust.

In conclusion, the results indicate that the influence of EL on OC is only partial, as TL serves as a significant mediator within this relationship. EL enhances TL, leading to more proactive and self-efficacious teachers. This reflects the dynamics of Social Exchange Theory, where EL behaviors foster reciprocal trust, and trust enhances teachers' affective attachment to their institutions. In centralized education systems, strengthening EL competencies among school leaders is crucial for fostering teacher development and commitment (Kılınç et al., 2022; Pazetto et al., 2024). Future studies should explore the effectiveness of EL across different cultural contexts to better understand how leadership processes are shaped by contextual factors.

This study advances the educational leadership literature by illustrating how EL enhances TL and OC, thereby offering practical implications for school administrators. The findings shed light on the mediating role of TL, providing a novel perspective that extends prior research on educational leadership and teacher attitudes (Limon, 2022; Özdemir et al., 2024). Particularly in centralized administrative structures where decision-making authority is restricted, EL emerges as a critical lever for increasing teachers' ownership and commitment, potentially contributing to improved school functioning and instructional quality. Future research could further examine the role of trust in OC within diverse cultural settings, informing sustainable leadership strategies (Park et al., 2025). Although conducted within educational settings, the findings contribute to the broader psychological literature by demonstrating how EL and trust dynamics influence OC processes across various organizational contexts.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study makes significant theoretical contributions by demonstrating the effect of EL on OC and the mediating role of TL. It clarifies how these factors interact in educational settings and highlights how EL fosters teachers' professional autonomy, motivation, and institutional belonging. The findings underscore the direct influence of leadership on OC, providing a foundation for interventions aimed at strengthening leader-teacher interactions.

From a theoretical standpoint, the results integrate the assumptions of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), emphasizing that EL behaviors foster reciprocal positive outcomes such as trust and organizational commitment. Additionally, Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a relevant lens, suggesting that EL enhances teachers' perceptions of competence and agency, thereby boosting their organizational commitment. Additionally, this study addresses a research gap by examining the impact of EL in centralized educational systems such as Türkiye. While previous research has predominantly focused on transformational and instructional leadership as key drivers of teacher commitment (Hallinger et al., 2018; Kılınç et al., 2022), the influence of EL on OC and TL has been underexplored. This study contributes to the existing

knowledge by demonstrating that EL enhances teachers' active participation in organizational processes, strengthens TL, and subsequently increases OC. This is also consistent with recent evidence showing that EL influences teacher outcomes both directly and indirectly through mediating mechanisms (Özdemir et al., 2026; Yao et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the findings affirm that even within Türkiye's high power-distance and centralized culture, the reciprocal exchange dynamics central to Social Exchange Theory remain operative: when principals enact empowering practices, teachers reciprocate with trust and commitment (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Blau, 1964; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). This both confirms SET's assumptions in a bureaucratic context and extends its theoretical applicability to systems where autonomy is structurally constrained. The results indicate that EL may function as a compensatory factor for the limited structural autonomy observed in centralized educational contexts. From the standpoint of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this finding underscores that teachers' essential psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be fulfilled not only through organizational frameworks but also through leadership-driven practices (Ryan & Deci, 1985). Hence, the results extend the predictions of SDT under bureaucratic constraints by demonstrating that EL plays a compensatory role in fostering teacher commitment. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers in educational leadership and extend beyond specific institutional or cultural contexts, offering a broader perspective on leadership strategies.

The implementation of EL depends on principals' formal authority and decision-making autonomy. In Türkiye's centralized education system, principals are appointed through a standardized examination process and operate under rigid bureaucratic regulations that limit discretion over staffing, budgeting, and curriculum (Özdemir et al., 2024). While EL positively influences trust and commitment, its scope may be broader in decentralized contexts where leaders enjoy greater autonomy (Pont et al., 2008). Evidence from similarly centralized systems such as China and India also shows that systemic constraints mediate principals' capacity to exercise empowering practices, even when trust and efficacy contribute positively to teacher outcomes (Khan, 2023; Yin et al., 2013). Cross-national research further indicates that leadership effectiveness is strongly mediated by governance structures and policy frameworks (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013). For instance, while principals in many OECD countries exercise discretion over resource allocation and teacher appraisal (Pont et al., 2008), Turkish principals' limited autonomy restricts the enactment of EL behaviors, underscoring the contextual contingency of leadership theories.

In practical terms, the study highlights the urgent need for leadership development programs focusing on EL competencies, particularly in centralized and hierarchical education systems. School administrators should be trained to promote participative decision-making, distribute leadership responsibilities, and build trust-based relationships, using applied strategies such as collaborative planning, teacher mentoring, and feedback loops. In the Turkish context, these practices can be operationalized through the distribution of leadership responsibilities, delegation of project-based initiatives to teacher teams, transparent and fair allocation of tasks, and granting teachers an active voice in professional development and curriculum-related decisions. Such culturally aligned strategies illustrate that EL can be implemented even

within rigid hierarchical structures, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice. However, the implementation of EL strategies in Türkiye requires not only training programs but also systemic reforms that expand principals' discretionary authority. Without addressing bureaucratic constraints in staffing, budgeting, and curriculum design, the practical effectiveness of EL initiatives will remain limited. In centralized administrative structures, school leaders' adoption of EL strategies can increase TL levels, reinforce teachers' commitment to the institution, and facilitate the spread of innovative educational practices (Hulpia et al., 2012; Pazetto et al., 2024).

Furthermore, practical interventions such as coaching and mentoring programs should be developed to systematically enhance EL behaviors at school level, thereby promoting a sustainable, trust-based organizational climate. These strategies could be structured into professional development modules as part of MoNE's national training agenda, enabling school leaders to practice and internalize EL competencies through scenario-based training, peer coaching, and reflective leadership tasks. In the Turkish context, where school principals operate under rigid bureaucratic constraints and limited autonomy, such applied programs can help mitigate systemic limitations and foster teacher agency. Indeed, recent empirical studies in Türkiye indicate that targeted leadership development initiatives enhance principals' capacity to build trust, strengthen teacher commitment, and foster collaborative practices despite structural constraints (Kılınç et al., 2022; Özdemir et al., 2024). Beyond professional development, strengthening the model requires explicit integration into national education policies, ensuring that EL practices are not only encouraged but formally institutionalized. To enhance scalability, pilot programs across diverse regions could provide evidence on contextual adaptability and inform wider implementation. Moreover, addressing systemic barriers, such as bureaucratic rigidity and limited autonomy, necessitates gradual decentralization initiatives, particularly in resource allocation and teacher evaluation, to create conditions under which EL can be enacted effectively.

This study aligns with recent educational management and leadership (EDML) research, emphasizing the crucial role of EL in fostering teacher commitment and professional autonomy (Kılınç et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). More importantly, this study offers critical insights into how EL functions within centralized education systems, contributing to policy development in non-Western contexts like Türkiye (Hulpia et al., 2012; Pazetto et al., 2024). The results highlight TL as a key factor in strengthening OC, offering context-specific leadership recommendations for non-Western education systems. Strengthening leadership competencies has been a global priority in recent years, aligning with international efforts in educational leadership. Leadership and management development programs, offered at both pre-service and in-service stages, are essential for strengthening school effectiveness and overall outcomes (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In particular, leadership development programs should incorporate trust-building strategies, conflict management, and empowerment techniques to reinforce teacher commitment even under bureaucratic constraints.

Implementing coaching and mentoring programs can enhance school culture, improve working conditions, and strengthen teachers' commitment to their institutions (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). In this regard, school leaders adopting EL practices can increase teacher participation in decision-making processes, offering an effective strategy for boosting organizational commitment. Beyond organizational outcomes, EL

has broader societal implications by indirectly enhancing student achievement and promoting educational equity. In contexts where teacher commitment translates into sustained instructional quality, EL practices can contribute to narrowing opportunity gaps across socio-economic groups, fostering a more inclusive educational system.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provides valuable contributions to the literature on educational leadership; however, several methodological and contextual considerations merit further reflection. The use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality among the examined constructs. While SEM offered a useful estimation of complex interrelationships, the absence of longitudinal data remains a limitation, and causal inferences should therefore be treated with caution. Future research would benefit from longitudinal or experimental designs to explore how EL shapes the development of OC and trust over time.

The contextual backdrop of the Turkish education system, which operates within a centralized structure shaped by distinctive cultural norms, may have influenced participants' perceptions of leadership and organizational attachment. These systemic and cultural characteristics restrict the generalizability of the findings, and interpretations should be made cautiously. In particular, the limited discretionary authority of Turkish principals, resulting from centralized appointment procedures and bureaucratic oversight, may constrain their ability to enact EL behaviors. This aligns with cross-national evidence showing that decentralization, school autonomy, and cultural norms can significantly shape the enactment and impact of leadership practices (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013). Testing the proposed model in different institutional environments, especially those varying in decentralization and collectivism, could offer valuable insights into the contextual sensitivity of leadership dynamics.

Another limitation arises from the exclusive use of teacher self-reports. While this method provides meaningful insights into teachers' experiences, it does not capture the perspectives of school administrators, whose views are essential for understanding the reciprocal dimensions of trust formation. Future studies would benefit from multi-informant designs incorporating the voices of school leaders, students, and families to present a more comprehensive view of organizational trust and commitment. Although several procedural remedies were implemented to minimize common method bias reliance on self-report data remains a limitation. Harman's single-factor test explained 24.8% of the variance, suggesting that CMV was present but not dominant.

Lastly, the hierarchical structure of the data, with teachers nested within schools, was addressed through multilevel structural equation modeling (ML-SEM). This method separated variance at the individual and institutional levels and increased the accuracy of the estimates. Nevertheless, given the contextual and methodological constraints, findings should be interpreted with caution. Future research examining similar constructs is encouraged to employ multilevel approaches to better capture the nested nature of educational datasets.

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Statement of Responsibility

The entire study was designed, conducted, and written by the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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