

## The Mediating Role of Trust in the Relationship Between Perceived Leadership Integrity and Work Engagement Among Chinese Primary School Teachers in Johor Bahru

*Peranan Kepercayaan sebagai Pemboleh Ubah Perantara dalam Hubungan antara Integriti Kepimpinan yang Dirasai dan Keterlibatan Kerja dalam Kalangan Guru Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina di Johor Bahru*

Yek Yew Ing\*, Loo Fung Lan

Faculty Education, Open University Malaysia (OUM), Malaysia

\*Corresponding author email: [vincent030606@oum.edu.my](mailto:vincent030606@oum.edu.my)

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 7 November 2025

Revised: 13 January 2026

Accepted: 10 March 2026

Published: 1 June 2026

### KEYWORDS

Perceived leadership integrity

work engagement

trust

mediating

Chinese primary school

Quality Education

### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.37134/mrj.vol15.1.9.2026>

**ABSTRACT** - Headmasters play a crucial role in shaping teacher work engagement and retaining quality educators in schools through their daily leadership practices. Existing studies have highlighted the relationship between perceived leadership integrity and work engagement in organisational settings, with trust identified as a key driver of work engagement. However, limited attention has been given to how headmasters' integrity in leadership influences teachers' work engagement. Addressing this gap, the present study examined the relationship between perceived leadership integrity and teacher work engagement, with trust as a mediating variable, among 1,358 Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru. Using probability sampling, 338 teachers were randomly selected to participate in this quantitative study. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analysed with SPSS and Smart PLS 4.0. Findings revealed that trust significantly mediated the relationship between perceived leadership integrity and teacher work engagement. Results also showed high levels of perceived leadership integrity, trust in headmasters, and work engagement among the participating teachers. These findings suggest that trusted school leaders foster more resilient, motivated, and committed teaching staff, which in turn enhances teacher retention, student performance, and overall school achievement.

**ABSTRAK** - Guru besar memainkan peranan yang penting melalui amalan kepimpinan harian mereka dalam membentuk keterlibatan kerja guru serta mengekalkan pendidik yang berkualiti di sekolah. Kajian-kajian terdahulu telah menonjolkan hubungan antara integriti kepimpinan yang dirasai dan keterlibatan kerja dalam konteks organisasi, dengan kepercayaan dikenal pasti sebagai pemacu utama keterlibatan kerja. Namun demikian, perhatian yang diberikan terhadap pengaruh integriti kepimpinan guru besar terhadap keterlibatan kerja guru masih terhad. Bagi mengisi jurang tersebut, kajian ini meneliti hubungan antara integriti kepimpinan yang dirasai dan keterlibatan kerja guru dengan kepercayaan sebagai pemboleh ubah perantara dalam kalangan 1,358 orang guru Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina di Johor Bahru. Dengan menggunakan kaedah pensampelan kebarangkalian, seramai 338 orang guru telah dipilih secara rawak untuk menyertai kajian kuantitatif ini. Data dikumpulkan melalui soal selidik berstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan perisian SPSS serta

*SmartPLS 4.0. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kepercayaan memainkan peranan perantara yang signifikan dalam hubungan antara integriti kepimpinan yang dirasakan dan keterlibatan kerja guru. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan tahap integriti kepimpinan yang dirasakan, kepercayaan terhadap guru besar, dan keterlibatan kerja yang tinggi dalam kalangan guru yang terlibat. Dapatan ini mencadangkan bahawa pemimpin sekolah yang dipercayai mampu melahirkan warga pendidik yang lebih berdaya tahan, bermotivasi tinggi dan komited terhadap tugas. Keadaan ini seterusnya menyumbang kepada peningkatan pengekalan guru, prestasi murid dan pencapaian sekolah secara keseluruhan.*

## INTRODUCTION

In primary schools, headmasters play pivotal leadership roles as role models whose integrity and actions shape teachers' attitudes, professional commitment, and performance. Evidence shows that leadership quality strongly predicts teacher work engagement, which ultimately influences classroom effectiveness and student achievement (Keravnos & Symeou, 2024; Wote & Sero, 2022). To meet these expectations, headmasters are required to embody professional norms such as fairness, transparency, collaboration, perseverance, and continuous improvement (National Policy Board of Educational Administration, 2015; Asim et al., 2023). Among these qualities, integrity remains the cornerstone of organisational effectiveness, reinforcing leadership credibility, building trust, and sustaining a positive school culture (Bujang et al., 2024; Yek & Loo, 2023).

Teacher work engagement is equally critical, as engaged teachers demonstrate vigour, dedication, and absorption, qualities that directly enhance teaching quality and student outcomes (Klassen et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2022). Studies have linked teacher work engagement to greater job satisfaction, creativity, adaptive coping, and performance (Wu, 2025; Burić & Macuka, 2018). Leadership integrity also strengthens teachers' trust, providing the ethical basis upon which teachers evaluate their leaders' values and behaviours. Trust, in turn, fosters a professional environment where ethical practices and collaboration thrive (Sakiman & Yasin, 2023; Konstantinos et al., 2019).

In Malaysia, education is positioned as a central driver of national development, creativity, and global competitiveness (MOE, 2013). The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 emphasises quality, equity, and access, but teacher retention has emerged as a pressing challenge. Primary school teacher enrollment declined from 230,631 in 2017 to 225,762 in 2021 (Li & Zhao, 2022), while more than 10,000 teachers opted for early retirement annually in recent years (Alzahari et al., 2022). Chinese primary schools in Johor Bahru face similar strains, with teacher shortages compounded by early retirements and increasing student enrollment in this densely populated district. These conditions highlight the urgent need for strategies to retain teachers through leadership practices that strengthen trust and engagement.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the relationships among perceived leadership integrity, trust, and teacher work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru. Specifically, it examines teachers' perceptions of their headmasters' integrity in leadership, teachers' trust in headmasters, and teachers' work engagement, as well as the mediating role of trust between perceived leadership integrity and work engagement.

The objectives of the study were: (1) To examine the level of perceived leadership integrity among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru; (2) To examine the level of work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru; (3) To examine the level of trust in headmasters among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru; (4) To identify the direct effect of perceived leadership integrity on work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru; (5) To identify the direct effect of perceived leadership integrity on trust among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru; (6) To identify the direct effect of trust on work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru; and (7) To identify the mediating effect of trust between perceived leadership integrity and work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru.

Accordingly, the research questions addressed: (1) What is the level of perceived leadership integrity among Chinese primary school teachers toward their headmasters in Johor Bahru? (2) What is the level of teacher work engagement in Johor Bahru's Chinese primary schools? (3) What is the level of teacher trust in headmasters in Johor Bahru's Chinese primary schools? (4) Does perceived leadership integrity

directly affect work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru? (5) Does perceived leadership integrity directly affect trust among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru? (6) Does trust directly affect work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru? and (7) Does trust mediate the relationship between perceived leadership integrity and work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru?

Based on these questions, four research hypotheses were proposed:

- H1: Perceived leadership integrity significantly affects work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru.
- H2: Perceived leadership integrity significantly affects trust among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru.
- H3: Trust significantly affects work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru.
- H4: Trust significantly mediates the relationship between leadership integrity and work engagement among Chinese primary school teachers in Johor Bahru.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Perceived leadership integrity

Perceived leadership integrity refers to employees' judgments about leaders' moral conduct and whether they consistently act in line with espoused values (Sigma, 2018). Leaders who display honesty, fairness, and discipline are seen as trustworthy, while the absence of integrity is associated with dishonesty, corruption, and disregard for rules (Suryadi et al., 2016). Integrity thus functions as the foundation of authentic leadership and sustainable organisational performance (Christie & Fellow, 2014; Nnonyelu, 2019).

In educational settings, headmasters' integrity is crucial for shaping school culture and earning legitimacy in the eyes of teachers, parents, and students (Gultom et al., 2021). Headmasters who align words with actions inspire trust, enhance teacher commitment, and drive school performance (Twin, 2022). For this study, perceived leadership integrity is defined as teachers' evaluations of headmasters' moral behavior and word–deed consistency.

### 2.2 Work engagement

Work engagement is a positive, fulfilling state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Carmona-Halty et al., 2019). Engaged employees invest energy in their work, find meaning in tasks, and experience deep immersion (Wood et al., 2020). Compared to merely motivated employees, engaged staff demonstrate higher performance, creativity, and resilience, benefiting both individuals and organizations (Kuok & Taormina, 2017; Bakker et al., 2023).

In schools, engaged teachers display enthusiasm, perseverance, and strong professional commitment, which enhance both teaching quality and student outcomes. In this study, work engagement refers to teachers' levels of vigor, dedication, and absorption among Johor Bahru's Chinese primary school teachers.

### 2.3 Trust

Trust is the willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on perceptions of benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness (Fumitaka et al., 2020). Leaders earn trust when their actions align with words, rules, and ethical standards (Cullen, 2015). Conversely, breaches of trust generate cynicism, burnout, and weakened organizational ties (Vikaraman et al., 2021).

Trust is therefore central to effective school leadership, as teachers' confidence in their headmasters influences morale, motivation, and commitment (Mineo, 2014). In this study, trust is defined as teachers' willingness to rely on headmasters perceived as reliable, caring, and authentic.

## 2.4 Behavioural Integrity Theory

Behavioural integrity refers to the perceived alignment between leaders' words and deeds (Simons et al., 2022). Leaders who consistently act in line with values foster trust, commitment, and positive work outcomes (Palanski & Yamamarino, 2009; Li et al., 2021). Conversely, violations of word-deed consistency erode trust and create cynicism (Sen & Basim, 2022). In schools, behavioural integrity is essential for establishing credibility and sustaining teacher commitment.

## 2.5 Leader-Member Exchange Theory

The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, grounded in social exchange principles, posits that leadership emerges when leaders and employees build effective relationships that enhance influence and yield mutual benefits (Saffrudin & Nohong, 2023). These relationships can range along a continuum from high to low quality, with empirical evidence demonstrating that their nature significantly influences employees' performance and job satisfaction (Santalla-Banderali & Alvarado, 2022; Khuc, 2024).

LMX Theory explains leadership as a social exchange process in which the quality of leader-subordinate relationships varies (Liden et al., 2016). High-quality LMX relationships marked by affect (mutual affection), loyalty (public support), contribution (shared effort), and professional respect (perceived competence), are linked with trust, job satisfaction, and performance (Haynie et al., 2014; Aggarwal et al., 2020). Low-quality exchanges, by contrast, remain transactional and weaken commitment.

Together, behavioural integrity and leader-member exchange provide complementary lenses for understanding the leader-employee relationship. While behavioural integrity emphasises the consistency between leaders' words and actions as a foundation of trust, leader-member exchange highlights the varying quality of dyadic relationships and their implications for work outcomes. Integrating these perspectives, the proposed theoretical framework (Figure 1) illustrates how the two theories intersect to explain the mechanisms through which leadership behaviours influence employee attitudes, performance, and organisational effectiveness.

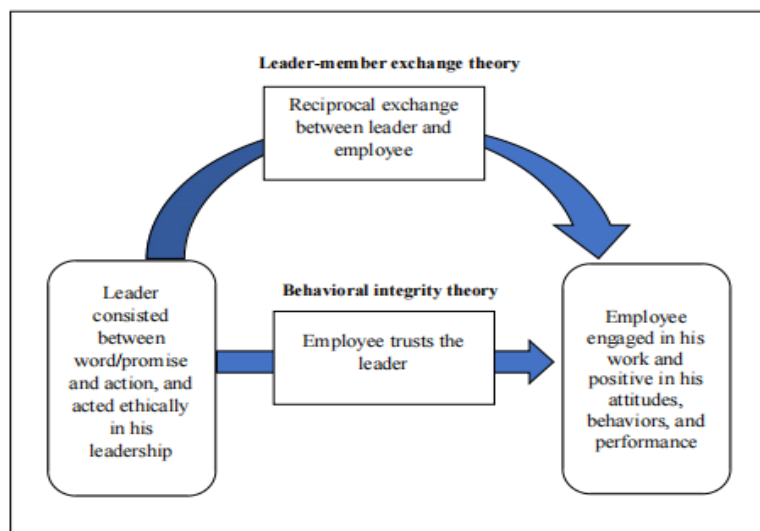
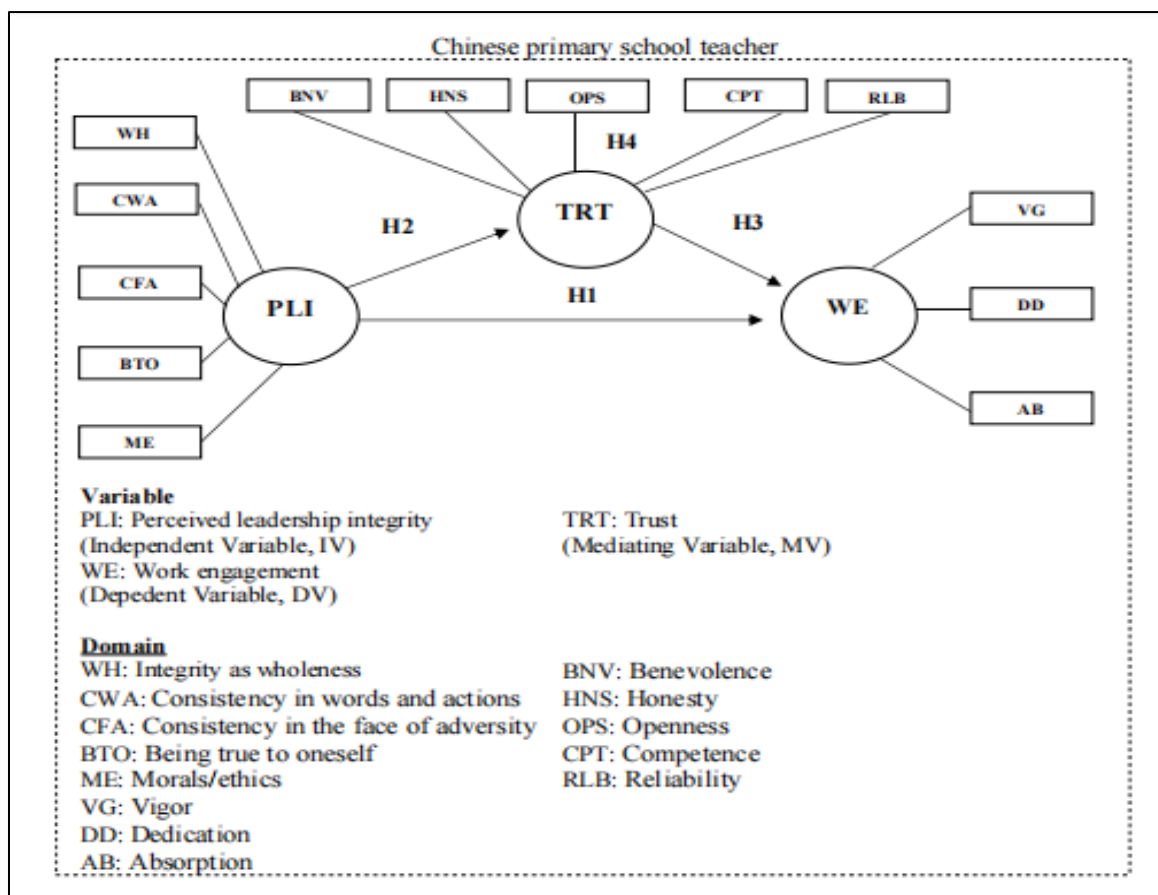


Figure 1: Theoretical framework of the study

## 2.6 Conceptual framework

In this study, perceived leadership integrity (Christie & Fellow, 2014) is the independent variable, work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2023) the dependent variable, and trust (Hoy & Tschannen, 2003) the mediating variable. The relationships are presented in the conceptual framework (Figure 2), along with hypotheses H1 to H4.



**Figure 2:** Conceptual framework of the study

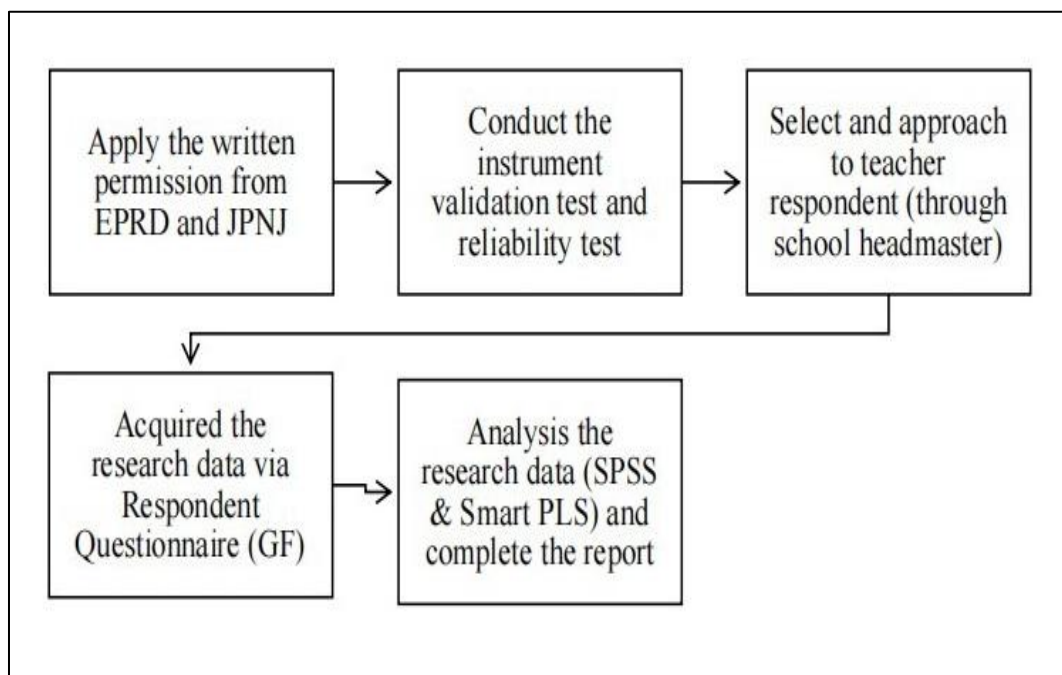
## METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employed a quantitative, non-experimental correlational design to examine the relationships among perceived leadership integrity, trust, and teacher work engagement. The research was conducted in Johor Bahru, Johor, with a target population of 1,358 Chinese primary school teachers under the Johor Bahru District Education Office (PPDJB). Using probability sampling, 338 teachers were randomly selected through a random number generator.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed for this study (Appendix A). Perceived leadership integrity was measured using the Perceived Leader Integrity Scale (PLIS) (Craig & Gustafson, 1998), adapted for the school context. The instrument comprised fifteen items across five dimensions (Christie & Fellow, 2014): integrity as wholeness, word-deed consistency, consistency under adversity, authenticity, and morality/ethics. Trust was assessed with eight items from the Faculty Trust Survey (FTS) (Garies & Tschannen-Moran, 2004), encompassing benevolence, honesty, openness, competence, and reliability. Work engagement was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-Short Version (UWES-9) (Schaufeli et al., 2002), which comprises 9 items assessing vigour, dedication, and absorption. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale.

Content validity was established through expert review by three doctoral-level scholars, with indices confirming perfect agreement (I-CVI, S-CVI/UA, S-CVI/Ave = 1.0). Reliability was supported by a pilot test with 30 teacher samples, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.9235, indicating high internal consistency.

The data collection process is illustrated in Figure 3. All responses were obtained from teacher participants within a single time frame. Data were analysed using SPSS (v. 25) and Smart PLS (v. 4.0), which were applied for both measurement and structural model assessments.



**Figure 3:** Data collection procedure

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that all measurement model assessment criteria achieved the recommended thresholds. Factor loadings exceeded 0.70, while Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values were above 0.80, indicating strong internal consistency reliability. AVE values greater than 0.50 confirmed convergent validity. Additionally, HTMT values below 0.90 and satisfactory Fornell-Larcker results established discriminant validity among the constructs. These findings demonstrate that the measurement model is reliable and valid, supporting its use for structural model evaluation.

**Table 1:** Assessment result of measurement model

Assessment	Testing Result
Constructs Factor Loading	Greater than 0.70 in all indicators
Cronbach's Alpha	All greater than 0.80
Composite Reliability (CR)	All greater than 0.80
Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	All greater than 0.50
Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT)	All less than 0.90
Fornell-Larcker	Between 0 and 1

Table 2 presents the assessment results of the structural model. The findings indicate that the structural model achieved satisfactory levels across all evaluation criteria, demonstrating its adequacy for hypothesis testing and predictive analysis.

The predictive relevance of the model was confirmed by the  $Q^2$  values, all greater than 0.50, indicating substantial predictive capability for the endogenous constructs. The Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value of 0.063 was below the recommended threshold of 0.08, suggesting a good model fit. Additionally, the Normed Fit Index (NFI) value of 0.874 approached the recommended benchmark of 0.90, indicating an acceptable level of model fit.

The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) values ranged from 0.80 to 0.995, demonstrating that the model explained a substantial proportion of variance in the endogenous constructs. Furthermore, all effect sizes ( $F^2$ ) values exceeded 0.35, indicating large effects of the predictor constructs on the dependent

variables. Multicollinearity was not a concern, as all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below 3.0, which is well within the acceptable threshold.

Overall, the results provide strong evidence that the structural model possesses adequate predictive relevance, explanatory power, effect size, and model fit. Therefore, the structural model is considered robust and suitable for evaluating the proposed relationships among the study constructs.

**Table 2: Assessment result of the structural model**

Assessment	Testing Result
Q Square Predictive Relevance (Q <sup>2</sup> )	All greater than 0.50
Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	0.063
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	0.874
Coefficient of Determination (R <sup>2</sup> )	Between 0.80 and 0.995
F-square (F <sup>2</sup> )	All greater than 0.35
Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)	All below 3.0

Table 3 shows that the levels of perceived leadership integrity, work engagement, and trust were high among the respondents. The mean score for perceived leadership integrity was 4.02, while work engagement and trust each had a mean score of 4.00 out of 5.00. These findings indicate that teachers generally perceived their headmasters as demonstrating high integrity, trusted their school leaders, and were highly engaged in their work. Overall, the results reflect a positive school leadership environment and a highly engaged teaching workforce.

**Table 3: Descriptive data analysis result**

Assessment	Testing Result
Level of perceived leadership integrity	Average mean 4.02 out of 5.00
Level of work engagement	Average mean 4.00 out of 5.00
Level of trust	Average mean 4.00 out of 5.00

Table 4 presents the results of the hypothesis testing and path analysis. The findings reveal that all proposed hypotheses were supported, indicating significant relationships among perceived leadership integrity, trust, and work engagement.

The results show that perceived leadership integrity had a significant positive effect on teachers' work engagement ( $\beta = 0.550$ ,  $t = 7.326$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H1. This finding suggests that higher levels of leadership integrity among headmasters are associated with greater teacher engagement in their work. Perceived leadership integrity also exhibited a strong positive effect on trust ( $\beta = 0.971$ ,  $t = 283.483$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H2. This result indicates that teachers are more likely to develop trust in school leaders who demonstrate integrity in their leadership practices.

Furthermore, trust had a significant positive effect on work engagement ( $\beta = 0.322$ ,  $t = 4.311$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H3. This suggests that teachers who have greater trust in their leaders tend to be more engaged in their professional responsibilities. The mediation analysis further revealed that perceived leadership integrity significantly influenced work engagement indirectly through trust ( $\beta = 0.313$ ,  $t = 4.298$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H4.

Overall, these findings confirm that trust is a significant mediator of the relationship between perceived leadership integrity and teacher work engagement. The results imply that leadership integrity not only directly enhances teachers' engagement but also indirectly strengthens it by fostering trust. Therefore, trust represents an important mechanism through which leadership integrity contributes to improved teacher work engagement.

**Table 4: Inferential data analysis result**

Path	Path Coefficient	P-value	T-statistic	Testing Result
Perceived leadership integrity → Work engagement	0.550	0.000	7.326	Significant and H1 acceptance
Perceived leadership integrity → Trust	0.971	0.000	283.483	Significant and H2 acceptance
Trust → Work engagement	0.322	0.000	4.311	Significant and H3 acceptance
Perceived leadership integrity → Trust → Work engagement	0.313	0.000	4.298	Significant and H4 acceptance

The findings confirm that leadership integrity significantly influences both trust and work engagement, underscoring the importance of leaders who align their words and actions consistently (Amir et al., 2023). From the perspective of behavioural integrity theory, this alignment enhances leader credibility and fosters a school climate built on fairness and transparency, which in turn sustains teachers' psychological commitment (Li et al., 2025).

Equally important, the results reinforce the relevance of LMX Theory, which posits that high-quality leader–teacher relationships are grounded in mutual trust, loyalty, professional respect, and contributions to shared goals. Teachers who perceive their headmasters as acting with integrity are more likely to develop strong exchange relationships characterised by affective bonds, reciprocal loyalty, professional admiration, and meaningful contributions (Li et al., 2025). Such high-quality exchanges nurture a sense of belonging and motivate teachers to invest energy and creativity in their work, thereby elevating overall engagement (Gopal et al., 2024).

The mediating role of trust highlights how integrity-driven leadership strengthens relational ties that are central to LMX processes. Trust serves as the psychological mechanism that bridges leadership integrity and teachers' work engagement, suggesting that teachers do not fully engage unless they first trust their leaders' intentions and values (Yek & Loo, 2023). These findings align with past studies that emphasise trust as both an outcome of integrity and a precursor to effective leader–follower relationships (Amir et al., 2023).

Practical implications emerge strongly from this study. First, headmasters must model consistent, transparent, and ethical behaviours to sustain teachers' trust and engagement (Amir et al., 2023). Second, leadership development programs should incorporate modules on integrity and relational competence, encouraging headmasters to cultivate high-quality exchanges with teachers. In this regard, the findings not only support but also extend the objectives of the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL), which emphasises integrity, trust-building, and ethical leadership as core competencies for Malaysian school leaders (Hussin et al., 2021; Sharmini et al., 2021; Li et al., 2025). Embedding these elements more explicitly into NPQEL training would ensure that headmasters translate leadership theory into consistent practice, thereby strengthening leader credibility, teacher motivation, and school culture (Yek & Loo, 2023; Zou et al., 2024). Third, policymakers should recognise that teacher engagement is not only a product of workload or compensation but also of leadership quality, suggesting that investments in ethical and relational leadership are critical for teacher retention (Gopal et al., 2024).

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study extends the application of both Behavioural Integrity Theory and LMX Theory within the educational context, offering evidence that leadership integrity and trust are critical drivers of teacher work engagement. By integrating these perspectives, the findings suggest that integrity is not only a personal virtue but also a relational resource that strengthens leader–teacher exchanges. For policymakers and practitioners, particularly through platforms like NPQEL, investing in leadership development that emphasises integrity, trust-building, and relational competencies is essential for sustaining teacher engagement and improving school outcomes.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The focus on Chinese primary schools in Johor Bahru may limit the generalizability of the findings to other school types or regions in Malaysia. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causality between integrity, trust,

and engagement. Future research could adopt longitudinal approaches, broaden the sample across states, and explore additional mediators such as organisational commitment or psychological safety.

Overall, the study highlights that cultivating leadership integrity and high-quality school leader-teacher exchanges is vital for strengthening teacher engagement and sustaining educational excellence, aligning directly with the mission of educational leadership and management development.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Faculty of Education, Open University Malaysia (OUM), for this research.

## FUNDING

This study was not supported by any grants from funding bodies in the public, private, or not-for-profit sectors.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

**Yek Yew Ing:** Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft preparation, and manuscript preparation. **Loo Fung Lan:** Supervision, validation, critical review of intellectual content, methodology, and writing – review and editing.

## AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

Data available on request from the authors.

## DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used generative AI tools to enhance the clarity of the writing. After using the generative AI tools, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the publication's content.

## ETHIC STATEMENTS

Not applicable

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