



Transformational Leadership as a Driver of Quality Culture in School

Pandang Darajat¹
Cancan²
Dian Faidillah^{3*}
Acu Haris⁴
Nisya Nurul Fitri⁵
Suhardin⁶

***Corresponding Mail:**
dian.faidillah@gmail.com

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Abstract

Schools increasingly implement quality assurance systems, accreditation, and standardized management practices to enhance educational quality; however, these initiatives often strengthen procedural compliance rather than cultivating a sustainable quality culture. Although transformational leadership and Total Quality Management (TQM) have been extensively examined, existing studies provide limited explanation of the organizational mechanisms through which leadership institutionalizes quality values within schools. This conceptual paper addresses this theoretical gap by developing a middle-range theory that explains how transformational leadership drives the emergence of quality culture through sequential organizational processes. Drawing on transformational leadership theory, organizational culture theory, and TQM, the study integrates psychological empowerment, collective commitment, and continuous improvement into a unified explanatory framework termed the Transformational Leadership–Quality Culture Theory (TLQCT). The proposed framework positions transformational leadership as the organizational catalyst that transforms individual commitment into institutionalized quality culture, thereby redefining quality culture as a strategic organizational capability rather than an administrative outcome. The study advances theory by integrating previously fragmented perspectives into a coherent explanatory model and provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical research examining the dynamic development of quality culture across diverse school contexts.

Keywords

transformational leadership; quality culture; total quality management; organizational culture; psychological empowerment

¹ Master's Program in Educational Administration, Universitas Muhammadiyah Bogor Raya, Bogor, Indonesia

² Master's Program in Educational Administration, Universitas Muhammadiyah Bogor Raya, Bogor, Indonesia

³ Master's Program in Educational Administration, Universitas Muhammadiyah Bogor Raya, Bogor, Indonesia

⁴ Master's Program in Educational Administration, Universitas Muhammadiyah Bogor Raya, Bogor, Indonesia

⁵ Master's Program in Educational Administration, Universitas Muhammadiyah Bogor Raya, Bogor, Indonesia

⁶ Department of Islamic Education, Universitas Ibnu Chaldun, Jakarta, Indonesia

1. Introduction

The educational landscape is undergoing profound transformation driven by digitalization, rapidly evolving societal expectations, and increasing demands for accountability and educational excellence. Schools are no longer evaluated solely by their compliance with national education standards but also by their ability to continuously improve learning quality, adapt to technological change, and create value for diverse stakeholders. The implementation of digital learning environments, data-driven school management, and competency-based curricula has shifted the focus of educational management from routine administration toward continuous organizational learning and quality enhancement. Within this context, quality management has become an increasingly important strategic orientation for educational institutions seeking sustainable competitiveness and long-term institutional effectiveness (Jasti *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b; Liu *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, contemporary educational reforms, including the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia, have reinforced the need for schools to cultivate adaptive organizational capabilities rather than merely comply with procedural requirements. These developments require schools to institutionalize quality as an organizational value embedded in everyday practices rather than as a periodic evaluation exercise.

Consequently, many schools have invested substantial resources in establishing quality assurance mechanisms through accreditation systems, standardized operating procedures, internal quality audits, strategic planning, and performance indicators. Such initiatives reflect a growing awareness that educational quality requires systematic management rather than isolated improvement programs. However, despite the widespread adoption of these formal quality management instruments, improvements in educational quality often remain inconsistent across schools. Several studies have argued that formal quality systems alone are insufficient to generate sustainable organizational excellence because they primarily strengthen structural compliance rather than cultural transformation (Jasti *et al.*, 2022a; Chen, 2012). More importantly, recent empirical evidence demonstrates that quality management practices contribute to educational outcomes only when they become embedded within the culture of educational organizations. For example, Parveen *et al.* (2024) found that school culture fully mediates the relationship between quality management practices and student performance, indicating that organizational culture constitutes the primary mechanism through which quality initiatives influence educational outcomes.

This phenomenon suggests that many schools experience what may be termed a "quality implementation paradox." Although accreditation documents, quality manuals, performance indicators, and administrative procedures have become increasingly sophisticated, the underlying values of continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and organizational learning are often weakly institutionalized. Consequently, quality initiatives frequently remain confined to documentation, compliance, and periodic inspections instead of becoming habitual organizational behaviors. Educational quality, therefore, is frequently interpreted as an administrative obligation rather than a shared organizational philosophy. Similar observations have been reported in studies examining Total Quality Management (TQM) implementation in educational settings, where quality initiatives often emphasize technical compliance while neglecting the human and cultural dimensions necessary for long-term organizational improvement (Cruickshank, 2003; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1997; Sahney *et al.*, 2004).

The limitations of such approaches are consistent with the fundamental principles of Total Quality Management. Classical TQM scholars argue that quality cannot be achieved merely through procedures, inspection systems, or standardized documentation. Rather, sustainable quality emerges from leadership commitment, organizational learning, employee involvement, and a culture of continuous improvement (Deming, 1986; Juran, 1988; Dean & Bowen, 1994). Anderson *et al.* (1994) further conceptualized quality management as a causal organizational theory in which visionary leadership initiates organizational learning, process management, and cooperation that ultimately generate

superior organizational outcomes. Similarly, subsequent studies emphasize that successful TQM implementation depends upon the interaction between "hard" quality practices, such as measurement systems and process standardization, and "soft" quality practices, including leadership, employee involvement, organizational culture, and commitment (Ali & Johl, 2022; Calvo-Mora *et al.*, 2014). These perspectives imply that leadership should not be viewed merely as an administrative function but as the central catalyst that transforms quality principles into collective organizational values.

Despite the growing body of research on educational leadership and quality management, important conceptual gaps remain. Existing educational leadership studies predominantly examine the direct influence of transformational leadership on school effectiveness, teacher performance, organizational commitment, or student achievement. Conversely, research on TQM in education has primarily investigated the relationships between quality management practices and institutional quality, service quality, accreditation outcomes, or organizational performance (Jasti *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b; Rahman & Nasrin, 2024). While these streams of literature have substantially advanced understanding of educational improvement, they have rarely been integrated to explain how transformational leadership contributes to the emergence of a sustainable quality culture within schools. Consequently, leadership and quality management are often treated as parallel constructs rather than mutually reinforcing organizational processes.

This separation has produced a significant theoretical gap. Existing literature provides limited explanation regarding the underlying mechanism through which transformational leadership transforms organizational values into a collective quality culture. Although studies acknowledge the importance of organizational culture, employee involvement, and readiness for change in successful TQM implementation (Baird *et al.*, 2011; Cavallone & Palumbo, 2022; Haffar *et al.*, 2013, 2019), these variables are generally examined independently rather than integrated into a coherent explanatory framework for educational organizations. As a result, the sequential process through which transformational leadership cultivates shared values, strengthens collective commitment, stimulates continuous improvement, and eventually institutionalizes quality culture remains conceptually underdeveloped. This missing explanatory mechanism limits both theoretical refinement and practical guidance for school leaders seeking to build sustainable quality-oriented organizations.

To address this gap, the present article develops a Middle-Range Theory proposing that transformational leadership functions as an organizational catalyst that converts individual commitment into collective quality culture through a sequence of interconnected organizational mechanisms. Rather than assuming that quality culture emerges automatically following the implementation of quality management systems, this article argues that transformational leadership initiates value internalization, encourages collective engagement, nurtures organizational learning, and institutionalizes continuous improvement until quality becomes an inherent organizational norm. This perspective extends existing TQM literature by positioning leadership as the driving force behind cultural transformation rather than merely one of several critical success factors.

The proposed theoretical model contributes to educational management literature in several important ways. First, it integrates transformational leadership theory, organizational culture theory, Total Quality Management, and continuous improvement into a unified explanatory mechanism capable of explaining the emergence of quality culture in schools. Second, it shifts the dominant focus of previous studies from examining direct relationships between leadership and organizational performance toward understanding the organizational processes through which sustainable quality is constructed. Third, by conceptualizing quality culture as a socially embedded organizational capability rather than an administrative outcome, this study enriches theoretical discussions concerning educational quality management and organizational transformation. Such integration also responds to longstanding calls for stronger theory development in quality management

research beyond descriptive applications and technical implementation (Dean & Bowen, 1994; Sousa & Voss, 2002).

Accordingly, the objective of this conceptual paper is to develop a theoretical model explaining how transformational leadership drives the formation of quality culture in schools. Specifically, the article proposes a middle-range theoretical framework describing the sequential mechanisms through which transformational leadership shapes shared values, collective commitment, continuous improvement, and ultimately institutionalized quality culture. By clarifying these causal relationships, the proposed framework is expected to provide a stronger theoretical foundation for future empirical studies while offering educational leaders a more comprehensive understanding of how sustainable quality can be cultivated through organizational leadership rather than through procedural compliance alone.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership has become one of the most influential theoretical perspectives for explaining organizational change because it emphasizes leaders' ability to inspire followers to transcend personal interests in pursuit of collective goals. Unlike transactional leadership, which primarily relies on exchanges of rewards and punishments, transformational leadership seeks to reshape followers' beliefs, values, and motivations, thereby enabling sustainable organizational transformation. Burns (1978) first conceptualized transformational leadership as a process through which leaders and followers elevate one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Rather than focusing solely on task completion, transformational leaders create shared purposes that inspire individuals to voluntarily pursue organizational excellence.

Bass (1985) subsequently extended Burns' conceptualization by proposing that transformational leadership enhances followers' willingness to perform beyond formal expectations. According to Bass, transformational leaders cultivate intrinsic motivation by articulating an inspiring organizational vision, encouraging innovation, and fostering trust-based relationships. Avolio and Bass (2004) further refined the theory by emphasizing that transformational leadership stimulates both individual development and organizational learning, making it particularly suitable for environments characterized by continuous change and uncertainty, such as educational institutions. Schools increasingly operate within dynamic policy environments requiring leaders not merely to administer educational processes but to mobilize teachers toward shared educational aspirations and continuous improvement.

The effectiveness of transformational leadership is generally explained through four interrelated behavioral dimensions known as the "Four I's." The first dimension, Idealized Influence, refers to leaders' ability to serve as ethical role models who gain followers' trust, admiration, and respect. Leaders exhibiting idealized influence consistently demonstrate integrity, fairness, and commitment to organizational values, thereby encouraging teachers to internalize similar principles. Within schools, such leadership establishes credibility that legitimizes quality initiatives and reduces resistance to organizational change.

The second dimension, Inspirational Motivation, concerns leaders' capacity to communicate an attractive and meaningful vision that aligns individual aspirations with collective organizational objectives. Through compelling communication and shared purpose, transformational leaders motivate teachers to perceive quality improvement not as an externally imposed obligation but as a collective mission. This shared vision becomes particularly important because organizational commitment emerges more readily when members perceive their contributions as meaningful rather than merely procedural.

The third dimension, Intellectual Stimulation, encourages organizational members to challenge conventional assumptions, seek innovative solutions, and continuously improve

existing practices. Rather than discouraging experimentation, transformational leaders create psychologically safe environments where teachers can reflect on instructional practices, exchange ideas, and develop innovative approaches to learning. Such behaviors closely correspond to the philosophy of continuous improvement underlying Total Quality Management because organizational learning depends upon critical reflection and collaborative problem-solving rather than rigid procedural compliance.

Finally, Individualized Consideration reflects leaders' commitment to recognizing individual differences, mentoring followers, and supporting professional growth. Transformational leaders understand that organizational transformation depends upon human development. Consequently, they invest in coaching, capacity building, and personalized support that strengthen teachers' competence and confidence. Employee involvement literature similarly demonstrates that organizational improvement becomes sustainable only when individuals feel valued and empowered to contribute actively to organizational development (Cavallone & Palumbo, 2022). Collectively, these four dimensions indicate that transformational leadership extends beyond managerial authority by creating psychological and social conditions conducive to organizational learning and quality improvement.

Within educational organizations, transformational leadership therefore should not merely be interpreted as an individual leadership style but as an organizational capability that aligns people, values, and institutional objectives. Its greatest contribution lies in creating conditions through which organizational members voluntarily internalize shared values that ultimately become embedded within school culture. Such a perspective provides the conceptual bridge linking transformational leadership with quality culture.

2.2 Quality Culture

The concept of quality culture emerged from the evolution of Total Quality Management (TQM), which gradually shifted organizational attention from inspection-based quality control toward organization-wide continuous improvement. Early quality pioneers such as Deming (1986), Juran (1988), Crosby (1979), and Feigenbaum (1991) consistently argued that quality should be understood as a management philosophy rather than a collection of technical procedures. Quality is achieved when every organizational member assumes responsibility for continuous improvement and customer satisfaction through systematic learning and collaborative problem-solving. Accordingly, TQM emphasizes leadership commitment, employee involvement, process orientation, evidence-based decision making, and continuous improvement as mutually reinforcing organizational principles (Dean & Bowen, 1994).

Dean and Bowen (1994) further advanced TQM by positioning it as an organizational theory rather than merely an operational toolkit. They argued that quality improvement emerges through three interconnected principles: customer focus, continuous improvement, and teamwork. These principles become effective only when translated into organizational practices that influence attitudes, behaviors, and collective learning. Consequently, quality cannot be separated from organizational culture because sustained improvement depends upon shared organizational assumptions rather than isolated quality initiatives.

In educational settings, however, quality has frequently been interpreted through the narrower perspective of quality assurance. Accreditation systems, performance indicators, institutional audits, and standardized procedures undoubtedly contribute to accountability and organizational consistency, yet they primarily emphasize compliance with predetermined standards. Such approaches strengthen administrative control but do not necessarily encourage intrinsic commitment toward continuous improvement. Several scholars have therefore distinguished quality assurance from quality culture, arguing that the former focuses on regulatory compliance whereas the latter emphasizes shared organizational values that naturally encourage quality-oriented behavior (Sahney *et al.*, 2004; Cruickshank, 2003; Jasti *et al.*, 2022a).

Yorke (2000) introduced one of the most influential conceptualizations of quality culture in higher education by arguing that sustainable educational quality depends upon institutional learning rather than procedural control. According to Yorke, quality culture develops when organizational members collectively internalize values emphasizing continuous reflection, collaborative improvement, and shared responsibility for educational excellence. Under this perspective, quality becomes embedded within everyday organizational practices rather than remaining confined to external evaluation mechanisms.

Accordingly, this article conceptualizes quality culture as an organizational condition characterized by three mutually reinforcing elements. First, shared values establish common beliefs regarding educational excellence, ethical responsibility, and commitment to improvement. Second, continuous improvement institutionalizes organizational learning through reflection, experimentation, and evidence-based refinement of educational practices. Third, collective responsibility encourages all organizational members to perceive educational quality as a shared organizational obligation rather than the exclusive responsibility of school leaders or quality assurance units. This conceptualization shifts attention away from technical compliance toward cultural internalization, providing a more appropriate theoretical foundation for understanding sustainable quality development within schools.

2.3 Organizational Culture and Continuous Improvement

Organizational culture provides the social context within which quality initiatives are either sustained or abandoned. Schein (2017) conceptualizes organizational culture as a system of shared assumptions developed through collective learning and transmitted to new organizational members as appropriate ways of thinking and acting. Because these assumptions become deeply embedded over time, organizational culture cannot be transformed solely through structural reforms or administrative directives. Instead, meaningful cultural change requires leaders capable of reshaping organizational values, beliefs, and behavioral norms.

The process of organizational change therefore depends heavily on organizational learning and continuous improvement. Anderson (2009) argues that continuous improvement in schools should be understood as an ongoing organizational practice through which educational institutions systematically reflect upon experiences, evaluate performance, and adapt instructional processes. Continuous improvement differs fundamentally from periodic organizational reform because it emphasizes incremental learning embedded within routine organizational activities. Consequently, sustainable educational improvement emerges from repeated cycles of reflection, experimentation, feedback, and organizational adaptation rather than isolated policy interventions.

Yorke (2000) similarly contends that quality culture evolves through institutional learning processes where organizational members collectively construct shared meanings regarding educational quality. Such learning gradually reshapes organizational assumptions and encourages collaborative responsibility for improvement. In this sense, quality culture becomes both the product and the driver of continuous improvement, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that supports long-term organizational excellence.

Empirical TQM research reinforces this perspective. Haffar *et al.* (2013) demonstrated that organizational culture alone does not guarantee successful TQM implementation; rather, its influence operates through employees' readiness for change. Their subsequent study further showed that multidimensional employee readiness—including change self-efficacy and perceived value of change—strengthens organizational capacity to institutionalize quality-oriented behaviors (Haffar *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, Baird *et al.* (2011) found that organizational culture positively influences operational performance because it facilitates the implementation of quality management practices. These findings collectively suggest that cultural transformation requires both supportive leadership and active organizational participation.

Within educational organizations, continuous improvement should therefore be interpreted not merely as an operational technique but as a cultural process through which teachers collaboratively examine teaching practices, exchange knowledge, and pursue better educational outcomes. Leadership becomes essential because it establishes the psychological conditions under which teachers willingly engage in reflection, experimentation, and collective learning. Consequently, organizational culture functions as the social mechanism linking transformational leadership with sustainable quality culture.

2.4 Theory Integration

Although transformational leadership, quality culture, and organizational culture have developed as relatively independent theoretical traditions, each addresses different components of the same organizational transformation process. Transformational leadership explains who initiates organizational change, organizational culture explains how shared meanings and behavioral norms evolve, while TQM explains why continuous improvement produces sustainable organizational quality. Examining these theories separately provides only partial explanations regarding the emergence of quality culture within schools.

A systematic comparison of the underlying theories clarifies their complementary explanatory strengths, identifies unresolved conceptual limitations, and establishes the rationale for integrating them into a unified theoretical framework.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Grand Theories Underpinning the Transformational Leadership–Quality Culture Theory (TLQCT)

Grand Theory	Primary Explanatory Focus	Conceptual Limitation	Explanatory Role in TLQCT
Transformational Leadership Theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Avolio & Bass, 2004)	Explains how visionary leadership mobilizes organizational members, inspires shared purpose, and initiates organizational transformation.	Provides limited explanation of how leadership behaviors become institutionalized as enduring organizational culture.	Serves as the organizational catalyst initiating value internalization and organizational change.
Total Quality Management (TQM) (Deming, 1986; Juran, 1988; Dean & Bowen, 1994)	Explains continuous improvement, teamwork, customer focus, and quality-oriented organizational practices.	Emphasizes managerial systems and operational processes while providing limited attention to the social mechanisms underlying cultural institutionalization.	Explains the behavioral mechanism through which continuous improvement becomes embedded in organizational routines.
Organizational Culture Theory (Schein, 2017; Yorke, 2000; Haffar <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Baird <i>et al.</i> , 2011)	Explains the formation of shared assumptions, organizational values, collective learning, and enduring behavioral norms.	Does not explicitly specify the leadership processes that initiate and sustain cultural transformation.	Explains the institutionalization mechanism through which quality values evolve into an enduring quality culture.

Source: Developed by the authors

Table 1 demonstrates that no single theoretical perspective adequately explains the emergence of quality culture in schools. Instead, transformational leadership, Total Quality Management, and organizational culture theory contribute distinct but complementary explanatory functions. Their integration provides the conceptual foundation for TLQCT by linking leadership initiation, behavioral institutionalization, and cultural internalization into a coherent middle-range theoretical explanation.

The integration of complementary theoretical perspectives provides a stronger explanatory foundation for understanding how transformational leadership institutionalizes quality culture through interconnected organizational processes operating within school organizations.

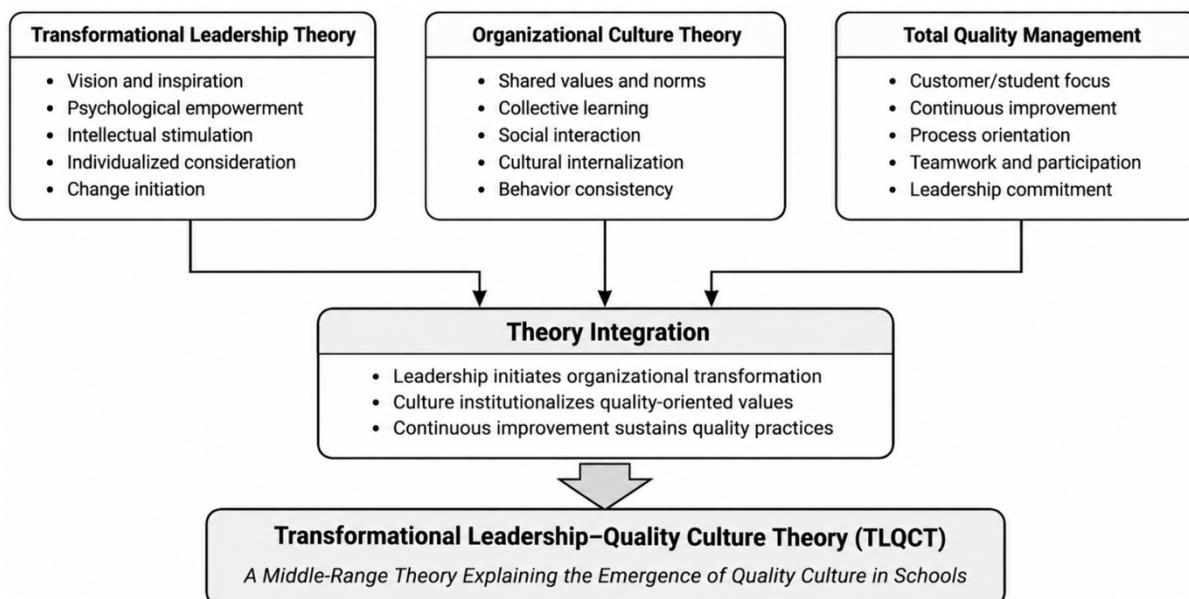


Figure 1. Integrated Theoretical Foundation of the Transformational Leadership–Quality Culture Theory

Source: Developed by the authors based on Burns (1978), Bass (1985), Deming (1986), Dean and Bowen (1994), Yorke (2000), Avolio and Bass (2004), and Schein (2017).

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical integration underpinning TLQCT by demonstrating the complementary roles of transformational leadership, organizational culture, and Total Quality Management. Rather than operating independently, these perspectives jointly explain how leadership initiates organizational change, culture institutionalizes shared values, and continuous improvement sustains quality-oriented behaviors, thereby providing the conceptual foundation for the proposed middle-range theory.

Accordingly, this article proposes that sustainable quality culture emerges through a sequential mechanism whereby transformational leadership cultivates shared values, strengthens collective commitment, stimulates continuous improvement, and ultimately institutionalizes quality as an integral organizational culture. This theoretical integration provides the foundation for the middle-range theory developed in the following section, which seeks to explain not merely whether transformational leadership influences educational quality, but how leadership transforms organizational values into sustainable quality culture.

3. Domain Specification

This conceptual paper is situated within the domain of primary and secondary educational organizations, encompassing elementary schools (*Sekolah Dasar*), junior secondary schools (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama*), senior secondary schools (*Sekolah Menengah Atas*), and Islamic schools (*Madrasah*). These educational settings share similar institutional characteristics in terms of organizational structure, leadership authority, quality assurance systems, and educational accountability. They are also increasingly expected to respond to rapid environmental changes driven by educational reforms, digital transformation, and growing public expectations regarding educational quality. Consequently, these organizations provide an appropriate context for examining how transformational leadership facilitates the emergence of quality culture as an organizational capability rather than merely an administrative function. While each educational level possesses distinct operational characteristics, they all rely on school leaders to mobilize teachers, coordinate

organizational learning, and sustain continuous quality improvement. Therefore, the proposed theoretical framework is intended to explain organizational dynamics that transcend differences in school level while remaining sensitive to the shared institutional characteristics of formal school organizations.

The primary unit of analysis in this study is the **school organization** rather than individual teachers or school leaders. Although transformational leadership is enacted through the behaviors of principals, the theoretical interest of this article does not lie in explaining individual leadership effectiveness or teacher performance. Instead, this paper seeks to understand how leadership behaviors become institutionalized as collective organizational values that shape school-wide quality culture. Accordingly, organizational processes: including shared values, collective commitment, collaborative learning, and continuous improvement, constitute the central explanatory mechanisms. This organizational perspective is consistent with the premise of Total Quality Management that quality is produced through interconnected organizational systems rather than isolated individual performance (Dean & Bowen, 1994; Anderson *et al.*, 1994). Likewise, organizational culture theory emphasizes that enduring behavioral change occurs when shared assumptions become embedded within organizational routines rather than remaining individual psychological attributes (Schein, 2017). Therefore, the organization, rather than individual actors, represents the appropriate analytical level for developing a middle-range theory of quality culture.

The scope of this conceptual framework is intentionally bounded to formal school organizations and does not extend to higher education institutions, industrial organizations, or commercial enterprises. Although the theoretical origins of Total Quality Management emerged within manufacturing and service industries, educational organizations differ substantially in their institutional goals, stakeholder relationships, governance structures, and definitions of organizational quality. Similarly, universities possess greater organizational complexity, decentralized governance, academic autonomy, and multiple missions involving teaching, research, and community engagement, making their quality dynamics considerably different from those of schools (Sahney *et al.*, 2004; Jasti *et al.*, 2022a). Consequently, direct generalization across educational sectors may obscure the contextual mechanisms through which quality culture develops in school settings. By restricting the domain to schools and madrasahs, this study aims to enhance theoretical precision while acknowledging that future studies may extend the proposed framework to other educational contexts after empirical validation.

The proposed theory rests on several interrelated assumptions regarding the emergence of quality culture within educational organizations. First, quality culture is assumed to be a socially constructed organizational phenomenon rather than a direct consequence of formal quality assurance systems. Organizational members collectively construct shared meanings concerning educational quality through repeated interactions, collaborative experiences, and organizational learning. Second, transformational leadership is assumed to function as the initiating force that aligns organizational members around shared educational values, creates psychological safety for innovation, and encourages collaborative engagement. Rather than imposing quality through hierarchical control, transformational leaders influence organizational members by fostering trust, shared purpose, and intrinsic commitment. Third, continuous organizational learning is assumed to mediate the institutionalization of quality values. Through cycles of reflection, experimentation, knowledge sharing, and process improvement, quality gradually evolves from an organizational initiative into a shared organizational norm. These assumptions are consistent with previous studies highlighting the importance of organizational culture, readiness for change, employee involvement, and continuous improvement in successful quality management implementation (Yorke, 2000; Haffar *et al.*, 2013, 2019; Cavallone & Palumbo, 2022; Baird *et al.*, 2011).

Finally, this conceptual paper deliberately positions quality culture as the principal organizational outcome rather than immediate improvements in school performance.

Although previous educational leadership studies frequently evaluate organizational effectiveness using indicators such as student achievement, teacher performance, organizational commitment, or school effectiveness, such outcomes are considered downstream consequences rather than the immediate objective of the proposed theory. This article argues that sustainable improvements in school performance can only be achieved after quality values have become institutionalized within the organizational culture. In other words, quality culture represents a strategic organizational capability that precedes and enables long-term improvements in educational outcomes. By conceptualizing quality culture as the primary dependent construct, this study shifts theoretical attention from short-term performance indicators toward the deeper organizational mechanisms that sustain continuous improvement. This perspective aligns with Deming's philosophy that organizational excellence is fundamentally rooted in a culture of continuous learning rather than episodic compliance with quality standards (Deming, 1986; Dean & Bowen, 1994; Yorke, 2000). Through this domain specification, the proposed middle-range theory is explicitly bounded to explain how transformational leadership institutionalizes quality culture within school organizations, thereby providing a clear conceptual foundation for the theory-building process presented in the following section.

4. Theory Building

4.1 Core Constructs

The central premise of this study is that quality culture is not an automatic consequence of implementing quality management systems but rather the outcome of a gradual organizational transformation initiated by transformational leadership. Although schools increasingly adopt accreditation standards, standard operating procedures, and quality assurance mechanisms, these formal systems alone cannot institutionalize quality as an enduring organizational value. Building upon transformational leadership theory, Total Quality Management (TQM), and organizational culture theory, this study proposes five interrelated constructs that collectively explain how quality culture emerges within school organizations: transformational leadership, psychological empowerment, collective commitment, continuous improvement, and quality culture.

Transformational leadership serves as the initiating construct of the proposed model. Burns (1978) conceptualized transformational leadership as a process through which leaders elevate followers' values and motivations toward shared organizational purposes. Bass (1985) and Avolio and Bass (2004) further argued that transformational leaders stimulate organizational change by articulating an inspiring vision, encouraging innovation, demonstrating ethical role modeling, and supporting followers' personal development. Within schools, these leadership behaviors enable principals to move beyond administrative coordination toward shaping organizational values that motivate teachers to embrace educational excellence as a collective aspiration rather than an externally imposed obligation.

Leadership influence is subsequently translated into psychological empowerment, which represents teachers' perceptions of meaning, competence, autonomy, and influence in organizational improvement. Psychological empowerment constitutes the first internal mechanism because teachers who perceive themselves as trusted professionals are more likely to participate actively in organizational development. Rather than functioning merely as implementers of educational policies, empowered teachers become contributors to school improvement by exercising initiative, creativity, and professional judgment. Employee involvement research similarly emphasizes that sustainable quality improvement depends upon organizational members who possess both the confidence and opportunity to participate in decision-making and continuous improvement activities (Cavallone & Palumbo, 2022).

Psychological empowerment strengthens collective commitment, defined in this study as the shared willingness of organizational members to pursue educational quality as a common

organizational responsibility. Unlike individual commitment, collective commitment reflects a socially embedded orientation whereby teachers coordinate their efforts, exchange knowledge, and support one another in achieving institutional objectives. Such collective responsibility transforms individual motivation into coordinated organizational action and establishes the social foundation for organizational learning.

Collective commitment subsequently generates continuous improvement, which represents the behavioral manifestation of organizational learning. Deming (1986) argued that continuous improvement constitutes the cornerstone of organizational quality because sustainable excellence requires ongoing reflection, experimentation, and systematic refinement rather than episodic reform. Likewise, Dean and Bowen (1994) identified continuous improvement as one of the three fundamental principles of TQM, together with customer focus and teamwork. Within educational organizations, continuous improvement is reflected in collaborative lesson evaluation, evidence-based decision making, professional dialogue, and routine reflection on teaching and learning practices.

The final construct, quality culture, constitutes the principal organizational outcome of the proposed framework. This study conceptualizes quality culture as an institutionalized system of shared values emphasizing continuous learning, collective responsibility, and commitment to educational excellence. Unlike quality assurance, which focuses primarily on compliance with predetermined standards, quality culture reflects the internalization of quality values that guide everyday organizational behavior (Yorke, 2000; Sahney *et al.*, 2004). Consequently, quality becomes embedded within organizational routines and collective norms rather than remaining dependent upon external monitoring or administrative enforcement.

The proposed theory comprises five interrelated constructs that collectively explain how transformational leadership generates quality culture through successive psychological, social, behavioral, and organizational processes within school organizations.

Table 2. Core Constructs and Their Explanatory Roles
in the Transformational Leadership–Quality Culture Theory (TLQCT)

Core Construct	Conceptual Definition	Theoretical Origin	Explanatory Role in TLQCT
Transformational Leadership	Leadership that inspires shared vision, empowers members, and stimulates organizational change.	Burns (1978); Bass (1985); Avolio & Bass (2004)	Organizational catalyst initiating value internalization.
Psychological Empowerment	Teachers' perception of meaning, competence, autonomy, and influence in organizational improvement.	Transformational Leadership Theory	Psychological mechanism translating leadership into individual engagement.
Collective Commitment	Shared responsibility and collaborative dedication to educational quality.	Organizational Culture Theory	Social mechanism transforming individual engagement into collective action.
Continuous Improvement	Ongoing organizational learning, reflection, and systematic refinement of educational practices.	Deming (1986); Dean & Bowen (1994)	Behavioral mechanism institutionalizing quality-oriented practices.
Quality Culture	Institutionalized system of shared values, norms, and continuous learning supporting educational excellence.	Yorke (2000); Organizational Culture Theory; TQM	Strategic organizational capability sustaining long-term school quality.

Source: Developed by the authors

Table 2 synthesizes the core constructs underpinning TLQCT by clarifying their conceptual definitions, theoretical origins, and distinct explanatory roles. Rather than functioning as isolated variables, the constructs operate as interconnected components within a sequential organizational mechanism that explains how transformational leadership progressively institutionalizes quality culture and supports sustainable school quality.

4.2 Mechanism Development

The proposed theory argues that transformational leadership influences quality culture through a sequential organizational mechanism rather than through direct causal effects. The first stage begins when school leaders communicate a compelling educational vision that gives organizational members a shared understanding of why quality matters. Transformational leaders create meaning by linking organizational objectives with broader educational values, thereby encouraging teachers to perceive quality as an intrinsic professional responsibility rather than a regulatory requirement (Bass, 1985; Avolio & Bass, 2004). This shared meaning enhances psychological empowerment because teachers recognize that their contributions are valued and capable of influencing school development.

The second stage occurs when psychological empowerment stimulates teacher engagement. Empowered teachers voluntarily participate in organizational activities, contribute ideas, and assume greater responsibility for educational improvement. Such engagement extends beyond task completion because teachers become intrinsically motivated to support organizational goals and collaborate with colleagues. As participation increases, organizational members develop stronger interpersonal trust and shared ownership of school improvement initiatives.

The third stage transforms teacher engagement into collective learning. Through collaborative planning, reflective discussion, peer observation, and knowledge sharing, teachers collectively construct new understandings regarding effective educational practices. Organizational learning gradually reduces individual dependence and establishes common approaches to solving instructional problems. These repeated interactions strengthen collective commitment while simultaneously reinforcing the school's shared quality values.

The fourth stage explains how collective learning becomes continuous improvement. Reflection and collaboration evolve into routine organizational practices through systematic evaluation, experimentation, and incremental refinement of educational processes. Consistent with Deming's philosophy, continuous improvement is viewed as an organizational habit rather than a temporary reform initiative. As schools repeatedly engage in organizational learning, quality improvement becomes embedded within everyday decision making instead of being activated only during accreditation or external evaluation.

The final stage describes the institutionalization of quality culture. Repeated cycles of collaborative improvement gradually transform organizational behaviors into enduring organizational norms. Teachers no longer improve educational practices because of external supervision but because continuous improvement has become part of the school's collective identity. Accordingly, quality culture emerges as the cumulative outcome of leadership-driven organizational learning rather than the direct product of formal quality systems alone.

The proposed theoretical mechanism conceptualizes quality culture as the cumulative result of interconnected organizational processes through which transformational leadership progressively institutionalizes quality-oriented values and practices within schools.

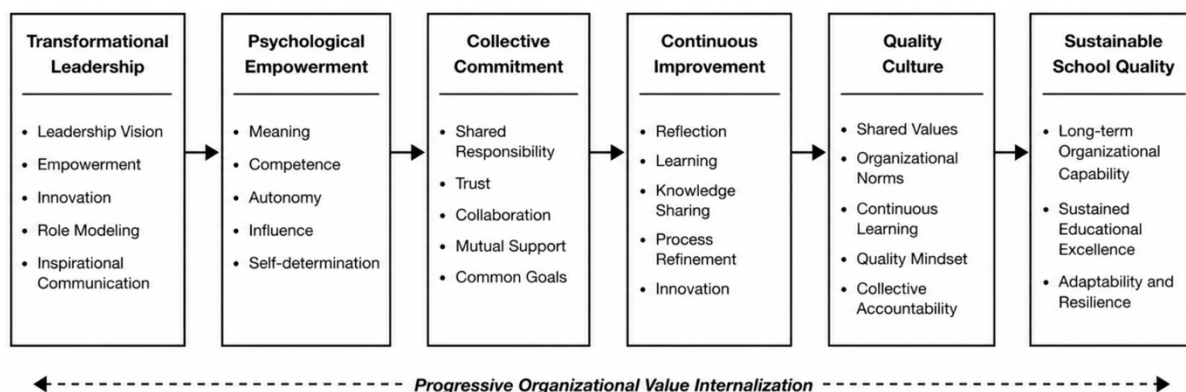


Figure 2. Sequential Organizational Mechanism Leading to Quality Culture

Source: Developed by the authors based on Burns (1978), Bass (1985), Deming (1986), Dean and Bowen (1994), Yorke (2000), Avolio and Bass (2004), and Schein (2017).

Figure 2 illustrates the sequential organizational mechanism proposed by TLQCT. Transformational leadership initiates organizational change by fostering psychological empowerment, which strengthens collective commitment and promotes continuous improvement. Through repeated organizational learning and process refinement, quality values become institutionalized as quality culture, ultimately supporting sustainable school quality as a long-term organizational capability.

4.3 Boundary Conditions

The proposed mechanism is expected to operate under several contextual conditions. School autonomy influences leaders' discretion to introduce innovation and mobilize organizational resources for continuous improvement. Organizational readiness determines whether teachers are psychologically prepared to embrace change, a factor identified as critical for successful TQM implementation (Haffar *et al.*, 2013, 2019). Teacher professionalism enhances the effectiveness of organizational learning because professionally competent teachers are better equipped to translate leadership vision into instructional innovation. Finally, policy stability provides sufficient continuity for schools to institutionalize quality-oriented practices. Frequent policy shifts may interrupt organizational learning, whereas stable educational policies enable continuous improvement to develop into an enduring quality culture. These boundary conditions are consistent with contingency-oriented quality management literature emphasizing that leadership effectiveness depends upon organizational context rather than universal managerial practices (Sila, 2007; Yazdani *et al.*, 2022; Parveen *et al.*, 2024).

4.4 Proposed Middle-Range Theory

Building upon the preceding theoretical arguments, this study proposes a new middle-range theory termed the Transformational Leadership–Quality Culture Theory (TLQCT). The theory is designed to explain how transformational leadership contributes to the development of quality culture through a sequence of organizational mechanisms operating within school organizations. Unlike existing leadership models that primarily emphasize direct effects on organizational performance or teacher outcomes, TLQCT focuses on the institutionalization of quality values as the primary consequence of transformational leadership. Likewise, unlike conventional TQM perspectives that concentrate on quality systems and management practices, the proposed theory argues that sustainable quality originates from cultural transformation rather than procedural compliance.

The central assumption of TLQCT is that quality culture emerges because transformational leadership successfully internalizes quality values into collective organizational norms through psychological empowerment, collective commitment, and continuous improvement. Leadership therefore functions as an organizational catalyst rather than a direct producer of educational quality. Principals initiate organizational transformation by communicating a compelling vision, establishing trust, encouraging innovation, and empowering teachers to

participate actively in school improvement. These leadership behaviors cultivate psychological empowerment, enabling teachers to perceive educational quality as meaningful and personally significant. As empowerment expands throughout the organization, teachers gradually develop collective commitment toward common educational goals. This collective orientation strengthens organizational learning and encourages continuous improvement, which ultimately becomes institutionalized as quality culture.

Accordingly, TLQCT conceptualizes quality culture as an organizational capability rather than an administrative outcome. Schools characterized by strong quality culture no longer depend solely on accreditation requirements, external supervision, or formal quality assurance procedures to sustain improvement. Instead, organizational members voluntarily engage in reflective practice, collaborative learning, evidence-based decision making, and continuous refinement because these behaviors have become accepted organizational norms. The theory therefore shifts attention from quality management as a technical system toward quality management as a process of organizational value internalization.

From a theory-building perspective, TLQCT integrates three complementary theoretical traditions. Transformational leadership theory explains the source of organizational change, organizational culture theory explains the institutionalization of shared values, and TQM explains how continuous improvement becomes embedded in organizational routines (Bass, 1985; Schein, 2017; Dean & Bowen, 1994). The integration of these perspectives provides a more comprehensive explanation than each theory offers independently and establishes a coherent framework for understanding sustainable quality development in schools.

The proposed middle-range theory synthesizes the preceding conceptual arguments into an integrated explanatory framework that specifies the organizational mechanism, contextual boundaries, and expected outcome of sustainable quality development.

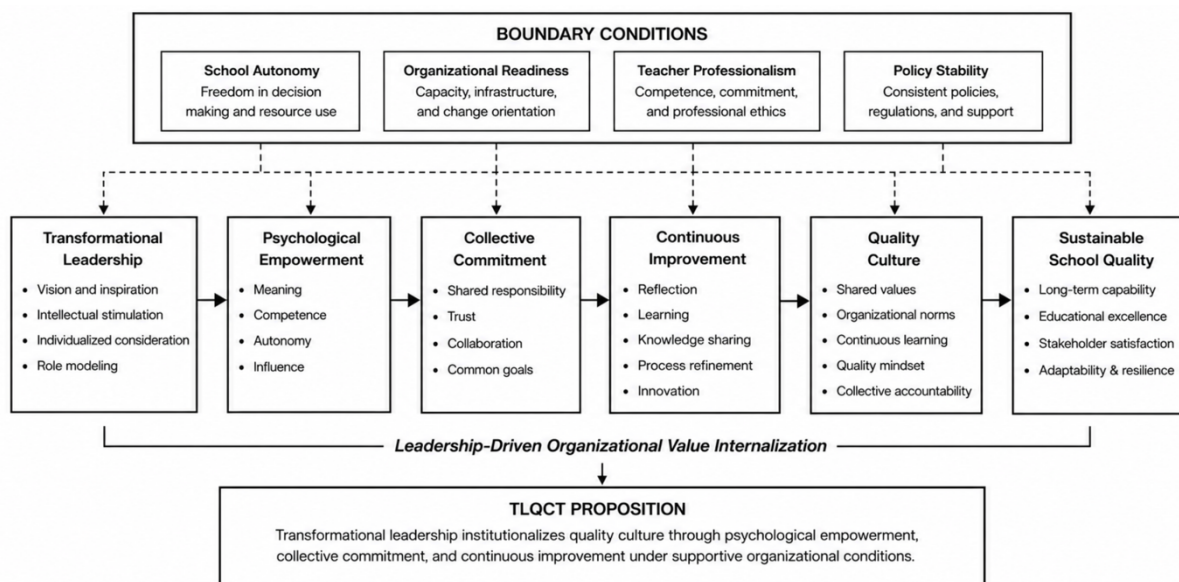


Figure 3. Transformational Leadership–Quality Culture Theory: A Proposed Middle-Range Theory
Source: Developed by the authors.

Figure 3 presents the formal representation of TLQCT by integrating the sequential organizational mechanism, contextual boundary conditions, and the ultimate outcome of sustainable school quality within a single explanatory framework. The model emphasizes that transformational leadership institutionalizes quality culture through interconnected psychological, social, and behavioral processes whose effectiveness depends on supportive organizational conditions, thereby defining the scope and explanatory logic of the proposed middle-range theory.

4.5 Proposition Development

Based on the proposed theoretical mechanism, six propositions are advanced for future empirical investigation.

Proposition 1 (P1).

Transformational leadership positively influences teachers' psychological empowerment by enhancing perceptions of meaningful work, professional competence, autonomy, and organizational influence.

Proposition 2 (P2).

Psychological empowerment positively strengthens collective commitment toward educational quality because empowered teachers are more willing to pursue shared organizational goals.

Proposition 3 (P3).

Collective commitment positively promotes continuous improvement through collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, and systematic reflection on educational practices.

Proposition 4 (P4).

Continuous improvement positively facilitates the institutionalization of quality culture by embedding quality-oriented behaviors into organizational routines and shared values.

Proposition 5 (P5).

Organizational readiness positively moderates the relationship between transformational leadership and quality culture, such that leadership exerts stronger influence in schools exhibiting greater readiness for organizational change..

Proposition 6 (P6).

Institutionalized quality culture positively supports sustainable school quality by enabling schools to maintain continuous organizational learning and long-term educational improvement beyond compliance with formal quality assurance systems.

The proposed propositions summarize the causal logic of the theory by linking sequential organizational mechanisms with their expected explanatory outcomes, thereby providing a coherent basis for future empirical validation.

Table 3. Summary of Theoretical Propositions Underpinning the Transformational Leadership–Quality Culture Theory (TLQCT)

	Proposition & Core Relationship	Underlying Theoretical Mechanism	Expected Organizational Outcome
P1	Transformational Leadership → Psychological Empowerment	Leadership communicates vision, trust, and autonomy, fostering teachers' intrinsic engagement.	Higher psychological empowerment.
P2	Psychological Empowerment → Collective Commitment	Empowered teachers voluntarily align individual efforts with shared organizational goals.	Stronger collective commitment.
P3	Collective Commitment → Continuous Improvement	Collaborative responsibility encourages organizational learning, knowledge sharing, and reflective practice.	Sustained continuous improvement.
P4	Continuous Improvement → Quality Culture	Repeated organizational learning institutionalizes quality-oriented values and routines.	Institutionalized quality culture.
P5	Organizational Readiness × Transformational Leadership → Quality Culture	Organizational readiness strengthens the effectiveness of leadership-driven cultural transformation.	Stronger leadership influence on quality culture.
P6	Quality Culture → Sustainable School Quality	Institutionalized quality values sustain organizational learning beyond formal compliance requirements.	Sustainable school quality.

Source: Developed by the authors based on the theoretical synthesis proposed in this study.

Table 3 synthesizes the theoretical propositions by linking each causal relationship with its underlying organizational mechanism and expected outcome. Rather than presenting

isolated hypotheses, the propositions collectively represent the sequential explanatory logic of TLQCT, demonstrating how transformational leadership progressively institutionalizes quality culture and ultimately supports sustainable school quality through interconnected psychological, social, and behavioral processes.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The proposed Transformational Leadership–Quality Culture Theory (TLQCT) contributes to the educational management literature by extending the explanatory power of transformational leadership beyond its traditional emphasis on individual attitudes and organizational performance. Previous studies have predominantly examined transformational leadership as a predictor of teacher motivation, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, school effectiveness, and student achievement. Although these studies consistently demonstrate the positive influence of leadership, they generally conceptualize organizational culture as a contextual variable rather than as the primary outcome of leadership processes. Consequently, existing leadership literature provides limited explanation of how leadership behaviors become institutionalized as enduring organizational values. By introducing psychological empowerment, collective commitment, and continuous improvement as sequential mechanisms, TLQCT shifts the analytical focus from direct leadership effects toward the process through which transformational leadership becomes embedded within organizational culture (Bass, 1985; Avolio & Bass, 2004).

The theory also advances the development of Total Quality Management (TQM) in educational settings. Classical TQM literature emphasizes leadership, teamwork, customer focus, and continuous improvement as essential principles for achieving organizational excellence (Deming, 1986; Dean & Bowen, 1994). However, much of the educational TQM literature remains implementation-oriented, focusing on quality assurance systems, accreditation, process standardization, and institutional performance. As a result, relatively little attention has been devoted to explaining the organizational mechanisms through which quality values become institutionalized. TLQCT addresses this limitation by repositioning transformational leadership as the catalyst that activates TQM principles through cultural processes rather than administrative systems. This perspective complements classical TQM by emphasizing that continuous improvement becomes sustainable only when supported by psychological empowerment and collective commitment instead of procedural compliance alone.

A further contribution concerns the literature on school management. Existing school management research frequently evaluates organizational success using performance indicators such as student achievement, school effectiveness, or accreditation outcomes. While these indicators remain important, they primarily represent organizational consequences rather than organizational capabilities. The present study argues that quality culture constitutes the strategic capability that precedes sustainable school performance. By positioning quality culture as the primary organizational outcome, TLQCT redirects scholarly attention toward the internal processes that enable schools to maintain continuous improvement despite changing leadership, policy reforms, or external accountability requirements. This capability perspective enriches educational management theory by emphasizing sustainability rather than short-term organizational outcomes.

The proposed theory likewise contributes to organizational culture scholarship by integrating leadership and continuous improvement into a unified explanatory framework. Organizational culture theory has traditionally explained how shared assumptions, values, and norms emerge through collective learning and repeated organizational interaction (Schein, 2017). Nevertheless, the theory provides relatively limited explanation regarding the initiating mechanisms that trigger cultural transformation. TLQCT addresses this limitation by specifying transformational leadership as the initiating force, psychological empowerment as the psychological mechanism, collective commitment as the social

mechanism, and continuous improvement as the behavioral mechanism through which organizational culture gradually evolves. Consequently, the theory provides a more dynamic explanation of cultural formation than existing models that primarily describe organizational culture as a relatively stable organizational attribute.

Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that sustainable quality culture cannot be adequately explained by leadership theory, TQM, or organizational culture theory in isolation. Rather, organizational transformation emerges through the interaction of these theoretical perspectives, thereby reinforcing the value of theory integration in developing middle-range explanations for educational quality management.

5.2 Practical Implications

The proposed theory offers several practical implications for educational stakeholders responsible for improving school quality. For school principals, the findings suggest that effective leadership should extend beyond administrative supervision and compliance monitoring. Principals should prioritize communicating a compelling educational vision, empowering teachers to participate in decision making, facilitating collaborative professional learning, and encouraging reflective organizational practices. Leadership success should therefore be evaluated not only by improvements in school performance but also by the extent to which quality values become embedded within everyday organizational behavior.

For school supervisors, the proposed framework indicates that supervision should emphasize organizational learning rather than procedural inspection. Supervisors can strengthen quality culture by encouraging reflective dialogue, mentoring school leaders, and supporting collaborative improvement initiatives across schools. Such developmental supervision is more likely to institutionalize continuous improvement than approaches focusing predominantly on regulatory compliance.

For school foundations and governing bodies, particularly in private educational institutions, TLQCT highlights the importance of investing in organizational capacity rather than exclusively strengthening administrative quality systems. Governing bodies should support leadership development, professional learning communities, teacher empowerment, and collaborative organizational structures that enable sustainable cultural transformation. Resource allocation should therefore balance investments in infrastructure with investments in human and organizational development.

For education authorities, including district and provincial education offices, the proposed theory implies that quality improvement policies should move beyond accreditation targets and administrative indicators. Capacity-building programs for school leaders should integrate transformational leadership competencies, organizational learning, and quality culture development into leadership preparation and professional development initiatives. Such an approach increases the likelihood that quality assurance policies will generate sustainable organizational improvement rather than episodic compliance.

5.3 Policy Implications

The findings also provide several implications for educational policy. First, policies promoting school quality cultures should recognize that sustainable educational quality depends not only on regulatory compliance but also on organizational values shared by school communities. National and local quality policies should therefore encourage schools to develop collaborative learning environments, professional trust, and continuous organizational improvement alongside formal quality assurance requirements.

Second, the proposed theory strengthens the conceptual foundation of Internal Quality Assurance Systems (Sistem Penjaminan Mutu Internal/SPMI). Existing implementation often emphasizes documentation, audits, and fulfillment of quality standards. While these mechanisms remain necessary, TLQCT suggests that SPMI will achieve greater effectiveness when complemented by leadership practices that cultivate teacher empowerment,

organizational commitment, and collaborative learning. Consequently, internal quality assurance should be viewed as both a managerial system and a cultural transformation process.

Third, the theory supports ongoing efforts in school leadership development. Leadership preparation programs should extend beyond managerial competencies by strengthening principals' capabilities in vision building, organizational communication, teacher empowerment, change management, and continuous improvement. Developing these competencies enables principals to function as organizational change agents capable of institutionalizing quality culture rather than merely administering educational regulations. Integrating these competencies into principal certification, leadership training, and continuing professional development would strengthen the long-term effectiveness of educational quality reforms.

5.4 Future Research Agenda

Although TLQCT provides a comprehensive conceptual explanation of quality culture development, empirical validation remains an important direction for future research. Because the theory specifies sequential causal mechanisms operating at the organizational level, future studies should adopt research designs capable of examining temporal, contextual, and multilevel organizational processes.

Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for examining how transformational leadership gradually shapes organizational culture over time rather than through cross-sectional relationships. Multilevel research could investigate interactions among principals, teachers, and school organizations to determine how individual perceptions become collective organizational capabilities. Comparative studies involving public schools, private schools, and madrasahs would further clarify contextual differences in quality culture development. Mixed-methods approaches combining structural equation modeling with qualitative organizational inquiry would also provide deeper understanding of both causal relationships and organizational processes. Finally, quantitative testing of TLQCT using covariance-based or partial least squares structural equation modeling would enable rigorous examination of the proposed sequential mediation and moderating effects.

Future investigations should extend the proposed theory across diverse organizational settings, analytical levels, and methodological approaches to strengthen its explanatory scope, contextual applicability, and empirical robustness.

Table 4. Future Research Agenda for Extending and Validating the Transformational Leadership–Quality Culture Theory (TLQCT)

Research Opportunity	Theoretical Extension	Suggested Methodology	Expected Contribution to TLQCT
Longitudinal development of quality culture	Organizational Learning Theory	Longitudinal research design	Validate the temporal evolution of quality culture.
Multilevel relationships among principals, teachers, and schools	Multilevel Leadership Theory	Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) or Multilevel SEM	Explain cross-level organizational mechanisms.
Comparative studies across public schools, private schools, and madrasahs	Organizational Culture Theory	Comparative multiple-case study	Assess contextual boundary conditions.
Sequential mediation and moderation testing	TLQCT	Covariance-Based SEM or PLS-SEM	Empirically validate the proposed causal mechanism.
Organizational readiness, trust, psychological safety, and resilience	Organizational Change Theory	Mixed-methods research	Extend the explanatory mechanisms of TLQCT.
Cross-national and cross-cultural validation	Institutional Theory	International comparative research	Examine the generalizability and

Research Opportunity	Theoretical Extension	Suggested Methodology	Expected Contribution to TLQCT
			contextual adaptability of TLQCT.

Source: Developed by the authors based on the future research agenda proposed in this study.

Table 4 outlines strategic directions for extending and empirically validating TLQCT across diverse educational contexts. The proposed agenda emphasizes temporal, multilevel, contextual, and cross-cultural investigations while encouraging methodological diversity. Collectively, these research opportunities provide a systematic pathway for refining the theory, expanding its explanatory boundaries, and strengthening its contribution to educational leadership and quality management scholarship.

Overall, these research directions provide opportunities to refine, extend, and empirically validate TLQCT across diverse educational contexts. Future investigations may also incorporate additional organizational variables, such as trust, psychological safety, organizational resilience, and digital leadership, to further enrich understanding of how transformational leadership shapes sustainable quality culture in schools. Such research will contribute not only to the advancement of educational management theory but also to the development of evidence-based strategies for improving educational quality through enduring organizational transformation.

6. Conclusion

This conceptual paper addresses a persistent challenge in educational quality management: despite the widespread adoption of accreditation systems, standard operating procedures, and internal quality assurance mechanisms, many schools continue to struggle to institutionalize a genuine quality culture. Existing research has provided substantial evidence regarding the positive effects of transformational leadership on school effectiveness and the contribution of Total Quality Management (TQM) to educational quality. However, these streams of literature have largely evolved independently, leaving an important knowledge gap concerning the organizational mechanisms through which transformational leadership transforms quality principles into enduring organizational culture. Responding to this gap, the primary objective of this study was to develop a middle-range theoretical explanation of how transformational leadership drives the formation of quality culture in school organizations through an integrated sequence of psychological, social, and organizational processes.

The principal novelty of this study lies in the development of the Transformational Leadership–Quality Culture Theory (TLQCT), which reconceptualizes transformational leadership not merely as a determinant of organizational performance but as the organizational catalyst responsible for institutionalizing quality values. Rather than assuming that quality culture emerges directly from leadership or from the implementation of formal quality management systems, the proposed theory explains that this transformation occurs through a sequential mechanism involving psychological empowerment, collective commitment, and continuous improvement. By specifying these mediating processes, the study extends existing transformational leadership theory beyond individual motivational outcomes, enriches TQM by emphasizing cultural internalization rather than procedural implementation, and advances organizational culture theory by identifying leadership as the initiating mechanism of sustainable cultural change. In doing so, the proposed framework provides a coherent theoretical integration that offers greater explanatory power than these theoretical perspectives provide independently.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the study also offers important implications for educational practice and policy. The proposed framework suggests that sustainable school improvement should not be evaluated solely through accreditation outcomes or administrative compliance but through the extent to which quality values become embedded within everyday organizational practices. Accordingly, school principals should prioritize

vision building, teacher empowerment, collaborative learning, and continuous organizational improvement as strategic leadership responsibilities. Likewise, school supervisors, governing bodies, and education authorities should complement quality assurance systems with leadership development initiatives that strengthen organizational learning and cultivate quality-oriented organizational cultures. Such a perspective reinforces the view that educational quality is fundamentally a cultural capability rather than simply a managerial achievement.

Notwithstanding these contributions, the proposed theory remains conceptual and therefore requires empirical validation. The sequential mechanisms, boundary conditions, and propositions advanced in this paper have not yet been examined through organizational data. Moreover, the domain of the theory is intentionally limited to primary and secondary school organizations, and its applicability to higher education or other organizational contexts should not be assumed without further investigation. These limitations, however, represent opportunities for theory refinement rather than weaknesses of the proposed framework. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to capture the dynamic evolution of quality culture, multilevel analyses to examine interactions among principals, teachers, and school organizations, and structural equation modeling to validate the proposed mediating and moderating relationships. Comparative studies across different educational systems and institutional contexts would also help determine the robustness and contextual boundaries of TLQCT while extending its explanatory scope.

In conclusion, this study argues that the long-term sustainability of educational quality depends less on the sophistication of quality management systems than on the capacity of school leaders to transform quality into a shared organizational value. By integrating transformational leadership, organizational culture, and Total Quality Management into a coherent middle-range theory, TLQCT provides a new conceptual foundation for understanding how quality culture is created, institutionalized, and sustained within school organizations. As educational systems continue to face increasing complexity, accountability, and rapid organizational change, the proposed theory offers a theoretically grounded and practically relevant perspective for advancing both scholarship and practice. Ultimately, positioning quality culture as the central organizational capability shifts the discourse on educational quality from managing compliance to cultivating enduring organizational excellence, thereby opening new directions for future theory development, empirical research, and transformative educational leadership.

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