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# The role of leadership styles in shaping school climate: A qualitative analysis of principals' interpretations

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## Abstract

**Context and relevance.** Positive school climate is central to learning and the overall well-being of students. It encourages a meaningful interaction among all stakeholders of the school. The school principal plays a key role in this regard. **Objective.** To identify the leadership styles of principals and specifically explore which style is more responsive to a positive school climate across Pakistani schools. **Methods and materials.** It was an exploratory qualitative study. The principals of 20 schools were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, followed by analysis using hybrid thematic analysis. The codes were categorized under various leadership theories, including transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. The frequency of the codes was also calculated to quantify the qualitative data. **Results.** The results showed that transformational leadership was the most commonly used style among principals, accounting for about 78% of the total codes. These leaders appeared to be more responsive to promoting a positive school climate in areas such as school management, decision-making, teachers' professional development, and student counseling and support. Meanwhile, transactional and laissez-faire styles had minimal impact on the school climate, constituting 18% and 2%, respectively. **Conclusion.** It is concluded that the leadership styles of the principals influence the creation and maintenance of a positive school climate. This study has implications for school principals and policymakers, highlighting the importance of encouraging transformational leadership to effectively manage schools.

**Keywords:** school climate, leadership styles, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, laissez-faire leadership

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## Роль стилей руководства в формировании школьного климата: качественный анализ мнений директоров школ

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### Резюме

**Контекст и релевантность.** Позитивный школьный климат имеет решающее значение для обучения и общего благополучия учащихся. Он способствует конструктивному взаимодействию между заинтересованными сторонами в школе. Директор школы играет в этом отношении ключевую роль. **Цель.** Выявить стили руководства директоров и определить, какой стиль в большей степени способствует созданию позитивного школьного климата в пакистанских школах. **Материалы и методы.** Исследование проводилось в качестве поискового качественного исследования. 20 директоров школ были отобраны методом целенаправленной выборки. Данные собирались с помощью полуструктурированных интервью, после чего анализировались с использованием гибридного тематического анализа. Коды были классифицированы по различным теориям лидерства, включая трансформационный, транзакционный и либеральный стили лидерства. Также была рассчитана частота встречаемости кодов для количественной оценки качественных данных. **Результаты.** Результаты показали, что наиболее распространенным стилем лидерства среди директоров школ является трансформационный, составляющий около 78% от общего числа кодов. Эти руководители, по видимому, более восприимчивы к содействию позитивному школьному климату в таких областях, как управление школой, принятие решений, профессиональное развитие учителей, а также консультирование и поддержка учащихся. В то же время транзакционный и либеральный стили оказали минимальное влияние на школьный климат, составив 18% и 2% соответственно. **Заключение.** Сделан вывод о том, что стили лидерства директоров школ влияют на создание и поддержание позитивного школьного климата. Данное исследование имеет значение для директоров школ и политиков, подчеркивая важность поощрения трансформационного лидерства для эффективного управления школами.

**Ключевые слова:** школьный климат, стили лидерства, трансформационное лидерство, транзакционное лидерство, лидерство, основанное на принципе невмешательства

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## Introduction

A positive school climate (PSC) is the meaningful combination of physical and psychological dimensions that results in the academic and psychological well-being of the school. Different elements play their role in developing a PSC. The role of school principals has become central in this regard (Haque et al., 2021). The principal is considered the gatekeeper of the school. They significantly influence school values and overall climate. Leadership styles can be defined as the manner, behavior, skills, and actions of the person who chooses to lead and interact with the followers. These styles and theories emerged in the 1970s with the main focus on the principal's role as instructional leader in shaping and improving the instructional strategies in school. According to Hallinger (2003), instructional leadership focuses on the establishment of school goals, communication of goals to the staff, and monitoring the teaching-learning process. With the passage of time, the focus of leadership was shifted from instruction to learning. The principals share their responsibilities with the stakeholders of the school as distributed leaders. Bass and Avolio (1995) proposed a combination of other leadership styles, such as transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership.

Transformational leadership has arisen as an effective style of principalship for making changes and improving the performance of all stakeholders of the school. These leaders are visionary and inspire their followers through their work and performance. The transactional leadership style focuses on clear rules and principles and is based on the concept of attaining goals through reward and punishment. It refers to motivating students and teachers by reinforcing positive and desirable behavior in terms of incentives or awards and punishing undesirable behavior (Jameel, 2021). This style contributes to the positive school climate by ensuring that both

teachers and students are accountable for their tasks (Dong, 2023). The laissez-faire leadership, also referred to as detached leadership and the "hands-off" approach, is the least interfering form of leadership (Young et al., 2021). These leaders provide minimal guidance to the staff and give them autonomy to lead and control their classes. The teachers working under these leaders consider themselves more independent. When it is not necessary, leaders with this leadership style never interfere with their teachers' work.

The relationship between principal leadership styles and school climate has become a key area of research in Pakistan. The findings from this research can benefit schools in Pakistan and other countries with similar education systems. This study seeks to address gaps in the literature by exploring the combined effects of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. The study has the following research questions.

1. How do the principals interpret their leadership role?
2. What leadership styles do the selected school principals possess?
3. Which leadership style contributes most significantly to fostering a positive school climate?

## Literature review

School principals are responsible for creating a positive school climate through different leadership strategies and styles. Their role is vital in facilitating the staff, encouraging them, and sharing innovative ideas (Haque et al., 2021). They play an essential role in ensuring academic progress, staff welfare, and improving the teaching-learning process. This includes boosting their self-confidence by reinforcing their efforts and guiding them to identify students' behavioral problems (Wahyudi et al., 2024). Therefore, examining the various leadership styles, such as transformational, transactional, and

laissez-faire, and their characteristics and roles in developing and maintaining a positive school climate is imperative.

The transformational leadership style has gained prominence in education since 2005 (Leithwood, 2021). This leadership style has been considered to change and transform the system of the educational organization with the recent advances and time to achieve the desired goals (Leithwood, 2021). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed. The school principals faced many challenges in changing their mode of education and transferring it from in-person to online (Jogezai et al., 2021). Transformational leaders are recognized for accepting change at any time. They manage the school system and motivate and inspire the staff.

In educational settings, transformational leadership is recognized for its potential to develop and maintain care, respect, and trust among the staff and students (Leithwood et al., 2020). These leaders demonstrate empathy and pay close attention to the problems of their staff. They care for their psychological and emotional well-being (Kareem et al., 2023). They are always open to providing guidance and counseling, and focus on collective responsibility and teamwork among staff and students. They are involved not only with their staff and students but also with the opinions of their parents and families (Heenan et al., 2024).

These leaders work for the professional development of their teachers and encourage their professional autonomy. For example, in schools, the curriculum is fixed, and the teachers are bound to complete the curriculum in a specific sequence and within a particular period, allowing them to change the sequence can strengthen their professional satisfaction. Similarly, actively involving teachers in decision-making, curriculum development, and policy formulation can develop a sense of ownership. These characteristics encourage teachers to innovate their skills and practices instead of strictly following the directives (Leithwood et al., 2020). They can help others to learn new skills and look for opportunities to grow the educational organization. This style has some advantages and disad-

vantages. They work together and inform all the staff about their goals and objectives, motivate, inspire, and facilitate (Hoque, 2025). On the other hand, this style does not work in all situations; it can be time-consuming, and it depends on the leader's sense of work (Kareem, 2023).

Transactional leaders focus on short-term goals and performance-based rewards. It is a top-down management approach. These principals set clear rules and expectations for their students and staff, monitor their performance and progress, supervise their activities, and enforce strict discipline (Mastul et al., 2024). It relies on praise or rewards for achieving targets and disciplinary actions for not meeting goals. Conversely, if short-term goals are not met, disciplinary measures are implemented (Lynch et al., 2025).

This leadership style is effective when basic needs are met and staff are skilled and well-versed in school principles. The characteristics of performance-based rewards make this style more advantageous. However, contingent rewards are the only aspect of transactional leadership effectively used with both students and teachers. This style includes some disadvantages, such as rewards and punishments not being suitable for every situation (Mastul et al., 2024). It works for individual motivation but is limited in fostering creativity and innovation (Hoque, 2021). These leaders do not leave space for others to voice their experiences, emotions, or ideas.

Laissez-faire leadership is a style in which principals interact minimally with staff. It allows individuals to exercise autonomy and encourages teachers to make independent decisions regarding classroom activities. This approach can positively affect workplace climate by increasing feelings of independence and trust among staff. By relying on self-motivation and individual initiative, laissez-faire leadership offers distinct advantages. It also provides teachers the freedom to set clear objectives and deliver lessons independently (Hoque, 2025). Teachers can explore and apply diverse teaching strategies, fostering creativity in the classroom. These benefits extend to students as well, as implementing this leadership style can enhance critical thinking skills and promote self-directed learning, which

positively influences both academic achievement and overall school climate.

Despite these advantages, *laissez-faire* leadership is less practical than transformational or transactional approaches. It is considered a passive style, with minimal supervision from principals (Young et al., 2021), and is effective only when clear guidelines exist, students are mature, and teachers are skilled. In such contexts, principals step back, allowing teachers to manage curriculum delivery and other educational activities independently.

Within the framework of school climate, the principal's influence can be both direct and indirect. In school settings, especially regarding student learning, we argue that the principal's influence is primarily indirect, though still significant (Leithwood et al., 2020). However, in the case of teachers, they directly influence their performance. Through subtle leadership, principals use their leadership role to create and sustain a positive school climate where everyone feels valued, trusted, and comfortable. Elements of school climate, such as physical, social, emotional, and psychological factors, are influenced directly or indirectly by the principal's leadership. Therefore, understanding the unique attributes of the three leadership styles is essential for fostering a positive school climate.

### Theoretical framework

This study is based on Bass and Avolio's full-range leadership theories (1994). This theory categorizes leadership styles into three main styles: transformational, transactional, and *laissez-faire*. This theory provides a comprehensive model that captures many leader behaviors, from highly engaged and visionary to passive and hands-off. Initially, these theories were used in business and organizational management. As the educational landscape evolved, scholars began adapting these leadership concepts to the field of education. Likewise, the school leaders are responsible for sharing their vision, inspiring staff, and working together to achieve the predefined goals. Transformational leadership gained recognition for its focus on shared vision, motivation, and innovation factors aligned with

educational reform and school improvement efforts (Hallinger, 2003). Transactional leadership is managerial and has been widely used in education. It works on the principle of an exchange and reward system. It is based on clear rules and expectations, performance monitoring, and accountability essential for school operations (Bass, 1990). *Laissez-faire* leadership is less common in the field of education. However, it plays a positive role for fostering creativity and innovation and helping the staff to make independent decisions.

Within this framework, we assume that each leadership style may contribute to school climate in different ways: transformational leadership may promote collegiality and trust; transactional leadership may reinforce order, rules, and regulations; and *laissez-faire* leadership may influence perceptions of autonomy and role clarity. These assumptions provide an analytical framework for interpreting principals' narratives, rather than prescriptive evaluations of effectiveness.

Thus, the theoretical framework of this study posits that leadership style is a central driver of school climate and seeks to explore how each of the three styles plays a role in creating and maintaining a positive school climate and its various dimensions.

### Materials and methods

This study employs a qualitative exploratory research design, a type of qualitative research that enables the researcher to thoroughly investigate the research problem. The approach is chosen because this research aims to explore the lived experiences of school principals and their role in fostering a positive school climate. Purposive sampling was used to select principals from different schools (Cresswell, 2013). The sample consisted of 20 principals from schools in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan, each with at least three years of experience as a principal and a willingness to participate in the study.

Baluchistan is a multicultural, multilingual, and multi-ethnic province. Schools in this region are culturally diverse, with students and teachers from various backgrounds, working together within the same institutions. The schools in the

region include both government-run (public) and private institutions. This study was conducted in government schools across Baluchistan. School sizes and staffing vary across the region, reflecting the typical educational environment where resources are limited and teachers manage large student groups. Class sizes typically range from 70 to 80 students, often divided into multiple sections to facilitate instruction. The student populations come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, providing a broad perspective on how leadership approaches influence school climate. These contextual characteristics help frame the interpretation of principals' experiences within each school setting.

In preparation for the interviews, we obtained written consent from all participants. Before collecting data, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights and responsibilities as research subjects, the confidentiality of the data, and their anonymity. All data were anonymized, with participants' real names replaced by coded identifiers.

### **Data collection**

We employed semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool, which allowed us to interact with the participants and ask probing questions to ensure clarity. To achieve this aim, we proposed an interview guide and developed the interview protocols. It consists of a few questions. These questions were related to the school principals' leadership styles, approaches, management practices, and school climate. An expert in qualitative research, educational leadership, and school climate validated the interview guide. Some probing questions were also used to clarify their opinion, and the interviews were conducted.

### **Data analysis**

The data were analyzed using a hybrid thematic coding approach based on Saldana's method. Hybrid thematic coding, also known as abductive coding, is a qualitative data analysis method that combines both deductive and inductive approaches. It enables researchers to start with deductive coding to identify the leader-

ship styles of the principals and then use inductive coding to explore how these styles relate to the principals' roles in developing and maintaining a positive school climate, allowing themes to naturally emerge from the data.

### **Deductive thematic analysis for identifying the leadership styles of the principals**

A deductive thematic analysis approach is a qualitative data analysis method that begins with a predefined conceptual or theoretical framework to identify themes. For this, Saldana's (2016) coding method was applied. It begins with the familiarization of data and the generation of initial codes. These codes were labeled according to predefined categories including transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles, along with their specific attributes. After initial coding, all the codes were quantified to assess their frequency. This helped determine which leadership style appeared more often in the data.

### **Inductive thematic analysis approach for emphasizing the role of leadership styles in school climate**

We also used an inductive thematic analysis approach by Saldana (2016). It involves several steps, starting with familiarizing ourselves with the data. During this phase, various codes were generated that shared a common point of reference. We then grouped similar codes to generate themes. In the next step, the themes were carefully examined and renamed where necessary to align with the study's objectives.

### **Results**

This section presents findings based on both deductive and inductive thematic analysis approaches. It covers the identification of principals' leadership styles. The number of codes from the three leadership styles was 259, with 204 for transformational leadership, 49 for transactional leadership, and only 6 for laissez-faire leadership. The analysis showed that transformational leadership accounted for 78,7% of the total codes, transactional leadership for 18,9%, and laissez-faire leadership for 2%.

### **Results based on the inductive thematic analysis approach:**

The results also showed the participants' interpretations of leadership, their roles in school management and decision-making, teacher motivation, student guidance, and emotional support. The themes that emerged from the data, related to different styles of leadership for developing and maintaining a positive school climate, are described below.

**Transformational leadership:** is the most common leadership style used by principals, accounting for 78,7% of all leadership styles. Principals with this style are visionary. They play a key role in creating and maintaining a positive school climate. One of the principals explained:

*"We always used to say to our teachers that you must have a vision of the next 15 to 20 years. We must prepare our students for the world of 2040 and beyond. (P-1)*

The analysis revealed that these leaders collaborate with their staff to achieve the defined goals. They show mutual respect and care, take responsibility, and maintain discipline. They encourage their teachers to treat their students well. One of the principals stated:

*"I believe that we can bring changes in the behavior of the students and teachers through care and respect". (P-4)*

Encouragement and motivation are the prominent characteristics of the leaders. The transformational leaders encourage their staff to apply innovative teaching methods and explore new ideas. They motivate them throughout their teaching and provide them with help. One of the principals explained:

*"I do not want my teachers to work only with traditional teaching methods. I want them to apply innovative strategies and practice new ideas". (P-13)*

### **Transformational leadership style and school climate**

#### **• Principal's interpretation of school climate:**

The analysis of the study revealed that transformational leaders represent the school climate in various ways. Some believe that the

school climate refers to the physical and social environment of the school, but others argue that safety and emotional attachments are also key elements of school climate. One of the participants stated that:

*"School climate is the physical and social environment inside a school's boundary. The basic elements of the school climate are the relationships among students and teachers and the physical appearance of the school". (P-2)*

They associated safety with maintaining discipline and preventing conflicts among students. The goal of these leaders is not only to impart knowledge to the students but also to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable and connected. One of them explained:

*"Students need to feel comfortable, and there is a need for a sense of ownership. An ideal school climate is one where individuals develop emotional attachments with each other." (P-4)*

#### **• School management and decision making**

The transformative leaders avoid working in isolation. Instead, they actively involve all stakeholders in decision-making and school improvement initiatives. They prefer to work collaboratively, foster ownership, and encourage their contribution and suggestions. As one participant noted:

*"The school can be managed effectively by the collective efforts of teachers, students, and other administrative staff". (P-16)*

These leaders follow the bottom-up leadership style. They arrange meetings and sessions with their staff. They share their goals and involve them in developing school improvement plans and decision-making. A participant highlighted:

*"I always ask my staff for suggestions before taking any final decision. Their involvement helps me make better decisions for school improvement". (P-20)*

Such practices not only enhance the credibility of the decisions but also help teachers feel valued and appreciated. Similarly, involving the administrative staff and students in management processes enhances their interest in improving the school climate. One of the principals shared:

“We have made small committees and have distributed tasks among the students and teachers. All of them work enthusiastically with interest”. (P-10)

Distributing responsibilities among students and teachers is necessary for improving the overall school environment.

- **Teachers’ motivation and professional growth**

These leaders encourage, inspire, and motivate others to actively contribute to improving school climate. They support and facilitate teachers by providing autonomy to implement innovative teaching methods and offering continuous encouragement. As one participant stated:

*“I think teachers can do everything. Giving them some autonomy and a chance to work for the students and the school’s betterment will lead to the school climate improvement”.* (P-4)

Inspiration and motivation, therefore, serve as the driving force behind higher achievement. The principal role is not limited to overseeing progress and celebrating achievement; it also involves inspiring and motivating the staff, boosting their morale, and encouraging their efforts. One of the participants emphasized:

“The principal leadership style really matters. I suggest that every principal should have training on leadership and how to manage and control the school.” (P-1)

- **Emotional support and counseling:**

Transformational leaders demonstrate a strong concern for all their stakeholders. They are consistently available to provide support, facilitation, and guidance. They adopt various measures to resolve emerging issues. As one of the participants explained:

“I really care for the psychological state of the students and teachers”. (P-8)

These leaders believe that many challenges can be effectively addressed by paying close attention to the emotional and psychological needs of staff and students. As further emphasized:

*“Through guidance and counseling, I think while paying attention to their problems, we can resolve their issues”.* (P-12)

- **Student guidance and discipline**

The ability to offer guidance and counselling is necessary for principals aspiring to be effective leaders. Participants emphasized that many school-related problems can be resolved simply through active listening and engagement. One of the participants explained the importance of direct interactions with the students.

*“I personally call the student and try to talk with them and understand their problem”.* (P-7)

These principals believed that their availability and accessibility enable their students to improve their behavior and make them more disciplined. Another principal described their practice of daily connection with their students.

*“We give 10–15 minute lectures daily on behavior, and I have seen positive results”.* (P-19)

Their daily interactions not only improve their behaviors but also help students feel easy, valued, and comfortable.

### **Transactional leadership**

The findings also highlighted the role of transactional leaders, though to a lesser extent. Participants who emphasized this leadership style focused on the attributes of the exchange and reward system. One of the principal illustrations:

*“For the smooth running of the school, we have to announce some rewards for the staff. If they meet the expectations, then they will be rewarded, but if they fail to achieve the desired goals, then they will be asked to change their behavior”.* (P-11)

They emphasize that positive behaviors should be reinforced to promote their continuation. Conversely, the negative behaviors should be addressed through disciplinary measures to discourage them. As one of the principals stated:

*“For those students who are active in school, we award them with a small prize, we motivate them and, appreciate their efforts. The same is done with the teachers”.* (P-15)

These leaders supervise their staff, recognize their efforts, and facilitate them. They work to maintain discipline in the school. Another principal stated:

*“I strictly supervise and monitor the staff performance. I recognize their efforts, which they do, and motivate them. I appreciate their work”.* (P-9)

These leaders emphasize the importance of strict discipline in ensuring that all the stakeholders follow the rules and achieve the objectives. According to one participant:

“The head of the school should be strict so that all staff follow them”. (P-11)

### **Transactional leadership and school climate**

- **Principal’s interpretation of school climate**

These principals have different interpretations of school climate. Analysis showed that the transactional leaders interpret school climate as the overall school environment. One of them illustrated:

“School climate is the overall environment of the classrooms and schools. It includes the building, resources, and materials that assist in the process of teaching and learning”. (P-11)

They stated that there are also other elements that can fall under the category of school climate. One of them demonstrated that:

“The school’s physical appearance, social relationship between the stakeholders, and psychological environment”. (P-9)

- **School management and decision-making**

Principals set clear rules, monitor the performance of their students and teachers, supervise their activities, and make judgments regarding the roles of both. They consistently enforce these rules. One of the participants stated:

“By establishing and following clear rules for all of the instructors and students, we can maintain a disciplined and positive school climate”. (P-11)

These principals do not involve their staff and students in the decision-making process. They make all the decisions on their own while following the rules. One of the principals illustrated:

“I do not want the teachers to interfere in my decisions. The way I analyze the situation as a principal is different. I can do better for my school and students”. (P-15)

These leaders are not collaborative; they are less open to staff feedback and suggestions.

### **Teachers’ motivation and professional growth**

The transactional leaders use rewards to recognize the efforts of their staff, enhance their interest in their jobs, and motivate them. They use different forms of rewards as elaborated by the principals:

“Those teachers who are active and regular and perform their duties sincerely, we acknowledge their efforts”. (P-18)

One other principal stated:

We appreciate the efforts of our teachers while organizing a small event. At the end of every month, we announce an appreciation award for the “Teacher of the Month”. (P-11)

If teachers do not fulfill their duties properly. And in case they do not follow the pre-defined rules and regulations. They are asked about their irresponsible behavior. A principal explained:

“Sometimes the teachers are asked for careless behavior. The purpose behind this is not to demotivate them, but just a reminder that you will be asked if you show laziness in their job”. (P-15)

### **Emotional support and counseling**

Analysis showed that the reward system has improved the behavior of the teachers. However, on the other hand, there are some barriers, such as stress and household problems, that hinder teachers from performing effectively in their workplace. And if, in that case, they do not follow the rule, they are asked to provide an explanation. This is demotivating to them. One principal also explained:

“I am supporting the reward system, but on the other hand, I am afraid of the consequences for asking my teachers for explanations. Because I know the situation of the teachers and the environment from where they are coming to their jobs”. (P-9)

Other than that, these leaders do not help their teachers with their emotional support.

- **Student guidance and discipline**

From the first day, students become aware of the school rules and the consequences of breaking them. The discipline is considered non-negotiable; they ensure it at every cost. A principal stated:

*"I cannot compromise on discipline because I think a student without discipline is said to be uneducated". (P-15)*

They continuously monitor and supervise students and teachers, ensuring adherence to established rules and regulations. Their focus is not on individual circumstances but on enforcing the laws themselves. Teachers, too, are held accountable to these regulations. As one principal stated:

*"We try to maintain a peaceful climate in the school. If students' behavior is negative, we deal with them through school management and established rules". (P-11)*

Analysis showed that only a few principals follow this leadership style. So it is considered less important in the context where the study is conducted.

### **Laissez-faire leadership**

The analysis showed that the laissez-faire leadership style accounts for only 1,8% of the total leadership styles. Within the sample, only one participant reported favoring this approach. They allowed their staff to work independently and play their role in improving the school climate. A participant stated:

*"We need to let our teachers teach the way they want to teach and work for improving the school climate". (P-17)*

The laissez-faire leadership style is effective only when the staff is competent, motivated, and capable of taking initiative and making independent decisions. As expressed by another participant:

*"I believe that my teachers can solve their problems on their own". (P-17)*

### **Laissez-faire leadership and school climate**

Laissez-faire leadership has its own distinct characteristics. The principals interpret the school climate as the environment of the school where teachers have freedom, and the principals do not show concern for the school. A principal explained:

*"School climate is the environment of the school where all the individuals are responsible for their own tasks and activities". (P-17)*

This is considered passive leadership. These leaders do not interfere in any tasks related to the school, teachers, or students. They show minimal interference in their teachers' professional growth and development. There is no clear evidence from the analysis on how these principals demonstrate their role in school management and decision-making, teacher motivation, emotional support, and student guidance and discipline.

### **Discussion**

The study yielded valuable findings in response to our three research questions, which focused on principals' leadership styles and their roles in managing the school, making decisions for the development of PSC, facilitating teachers' professional development, and providing student counseling. Our findings indicate that the most prominent leadership style, as interpreted by the principals in schools across Baluchistan, is transformational leadership. Principals employ this style by sharing the school's vision, collaborating with others, and demonstrating care and respect for all stakeholders. They communicate their plans to all members of the school community to achieve set objectives. Transformational leaders take care of and respect all stakeholders, including students, teachers, and administrators. As noted by Leithwood et al. (2020), transformational leaders in educational settings are particularly distinguished by their demonstration of care and respect. Encouragement and motivation are among the most prominent characteristics of these leaders, who also inspire staff to apply innovative teaching methods and explore new ideas. These findings are consistent with the study of Heenan (2023).

According to our findings, the principals perceived transformational leaders as those who interpret the school climate as the physical, social, and psychological environment of the school, where all stakeholders feel respected and cared for. This supports the conclusion drawn by Cohen (2017), who viewed positive school climate as a multifaceted concept that encompasses the physical environment and resources of the school, the teaching-learning process, student engagement and safety, as well as rules, regulations, and teacher support.

The findings also revealed different characteristics, including school management and decision-making, teacher motivation and professional growth, emotional support for both teachers and students, and students' guidance and discipline. The principals were reported to prefer working collaboratively, listening to students' problems, and encouraging their contributions and suggestions as stated in the literature (Leithwood et al., 2020). Furthermore, the findings highlighted in this study are also reflected in the characteristics of the educational environment demonstrated by Yasvin (2019). Such practices also help teachers feel valued and respected. These findings are consistent with the earlier research of Kılınç et al. (2024).

The study's findings suggest that elements of other leadership styles, such as transactional leadership and laissez-faire, coexisted alongside the dominant leadership style. The role of laissez-faire leadership, however, is observed to be minimal in maintaining the school climate. Transactional leaders also play a role in school management. They focus on performance-based rewards, making decisions for school improvement, and strictly follow the rules and regulations. Our findings demonstrate that the reward system is effective for both teachers and students. Whether it is the teacher's professional growth or their emotional state of mind, these leaders motivate them through appreciation and rewards. Similar results were reported by Chan (2020). These leaders supervise their staff, recognize their efforts, and facilitate them. They work to maintain discipline in the school, as the literature also shows (Mastul et al., 2024). These findings resonate with those of leaders who do not compromise on the pre-defined rules and regulations. Breaking the rule is not acceptable in any circumstances. These observations uphold the claims made by Lynch et al. (2022). These observation and findings suggest that school leadership is not confined to only one style. The previous research also indicates that the school leaders often combine participatory

practices depending on situational and contextual needs (Leithwood et al., 2020; Heenan, 2023).

The present study is grounded in Bass and Avolio's full-range leadership theory, which encompasses three different leadership styles and exhibits partial correspondence with the classical leadership styles of Kurt Lewin. According to Northouse (2021), Kurt Lewin proposed three leadership styles, democratic, authoritarian, and liberal, which share characteristics closely aligned with those in Bass and Avolio's framework. This indicates that although the terminologies are different, the core meaning and their influence on developing and maintaining a school climate exhibit a significant conceptual overlap.

### Conclusion

This study focused on the three different leadership styles of principals and their role in creating a positive school climate. 20 school principals were selected through a purposive sampling technique. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews followed by hybrid thematic coding. Deductive coding was employed to identify the leadership styles of the school principals, while inductive coding was used to identify the principals' roles in developing and maintaining a positive school climate. The data also showed the principal's role in developing and maintaining a positive school climate. The findings explained that principal's perceived, transformational and transactional leadership as contributing more to school management and decision-making, teachers' motivation and professional growth, emotional support, counselling, and students' guidance, as compared to the laissez-faire leadership style.

**Limitations.** This study was limited only to the principals' perceptions of their leadership styles. No other stakeholders of the school, such as students and teachers, are involved in this study. Which the future research may take into consideration.

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### **Contribution of the authors**

Seema Azeem — responsible for conceptualizing the research, collecting and transcribing the data, and writing the research report.

Alexandra Bochaver — supervised all stages of the data process, reviewed the research report, and provided continuous valuable feedback throughout.

All authors contributed to the discussion of the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Конфликт интересов**

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The study was reviewed and approved by the ethical review committee of a university (names withheld for anonymity) approved this study (FSC/EDU-1374).

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