

# Policy–governance–culture dynamics in Myanmar education reform: implications for transformational leadership practice

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## ABSTRACT

Myanmar's education reform faces a persistent enactment gap because policy intent is filtered through governance feasibility and culturally grounded legitimacy norms. This study examined whether transformational leadership functions as a mediation practice that buffers policy–governance misalignment and under what conditions that buffering is stronger. The novelty of this study lies in proposing and testing an integrated policy–governance–culture (PGC) leadership mediation model that explains reform enactment through the joint effects of structural misalignment, leadership buffering, and culturally conditioned legitimacy. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design combined a two-wave time-lag survey of teachers and middle leaders from 48 schools (N=720) with semi-structured interviews to clarify mechanisms. Measurement models showed acceptable-to-strong fit (CFA: CFI=0.956, TLI=0.948, RMSEA=0.044, SRMR=0.041). Multilevel SEM (ICC\_RE=0.11) indicated that policy–governance misalignment directly reduced reform enactment ( $\beta=-0.15$ ,  $p=.003$ ) while increasing leadership mediation practices ( $\beta=0.25$ ,  $p<.001$ ), which in turn predicted enactment ( $\beta=0.30$ ,  $p<.001$ ), yielding a positive indirect effect ( $ab=0.075$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Cultural norms strengthened the leadership–enactment link ( $\beta=0.10$ ,  $p=.001$ ), producing moderated mediation. These findings suggest that leadership can buffer—but cannot replace—policy–governance coherence and provide diagnostic logic for reform evaluation under legitimacy constraints.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Myanmar's education reform agenda has long been framed as a pathway to national development, social cohesion, and human-capital upgrading; however, the post-coup period has intensified systemic fragility and widened the distance between reform intent and feasible implementation. Recent evidence highlights how policy turbulence, governance disruption, and socio-cultural shifts have reshaped access, participation, and institutional functioning across higher education and beyond [1]–[3]. Implementation research repeatedly shows that reform rarely moves linearly from central policy design to classroom change; instead, it is translated through administrative routines, material conditions, and local actor interpretation, which can diverge sharply across settings and levels of the system [4], [5]. In crisis-affected contexts, the educator's role also expands beyond instruction to safeguarding continuity, legitimacy, and student support, further stretching already limited institutional capacity [6]. Myanmar illustrates these implementation challenges acutely. Even when reform goals are formally articulated, enactment is frequently constrained by

uneven professional capacity, fragile institutional support, and schooling conditions shaped by insecurity, which can make “reform” appear as compliance labor rather than improvement work [7]–[9]. As a result, schools may become administratively legible—able to report activity—without achieving the pedagogical depth needed for meaningful learning gains.

Crucially, implementation is also mediated by culturally embedded expectations about authority, participation, and appropriate role boundaries within schools and communities. Autonomy reforms, for instance, are rarely experienced as pure empowerment; they are interpreted through accountability pressures, supervision logics, and organizational norms that shape what actors perceive as safe, legitimate, and worthwhile [10], [11]. Where these expectations are misaligned with reform demands, schools may protect stability and avoid risk rather than experiment with new practices [12]. When reform is perceived as externally imposed, administratively burdensome, or normatively misfitting, local actors may shift toward symbolic compliance—producing documents and meeting procedural requirements—while withholding discretionary effort required for sustained instructional change. This pattern is consistent with evidence that the design–implementation gap in autonomy and accountability reforms is often driven by the difference between formal policy statements and the lived governance conditions under which schools operate [13]–[15]. These realities raise a practical governance question: under what conditions can school and system leaders convert reform intent into legitimate, feasible, and sustained practice—rather than procedural adherence—particularly in constrained and unstable environments? [16], [17]. Related work on data-based governance and leadership preparation also suggests that when managerial demands outpace leadership capacity, reforms can become technically enacted but educationally thin [18].

A growing body of scholarship explains why reforms stall, but it often does so through partially separated lenses. Policy enactment perspectives argue that policy is not simply “implemented”; it is interpreted, translated, and reconstituted by actors working within specific organizational, material, and political contexts—so identical policy texts can yield divergent practices across sites [19]–[21]. This enactment view aligns with sensemaking research showing that policy coherence, clarity, and perceived relevance shape how reform messages become routinized into school-level decisions, documentation practices, and classroom instruction. Collective sensemaking is particularly consequential during change processes because it determines whether reform is treated as meaningful improvement or as administrative work to be managed [22], [23]. Empirical studies of daily leadership dynamics likewise indicate that leadership influence is often enacted through micro-level interactions that shape motivation, interpretation, and performance [24]. Education governance research complements enactment accounts by foregrounding the institutional architecture that makes reform feasible or fragile. Decision rights, accountability relationships, and supervision logics delimit what leaders can do—even when decentralization is formally declared—thereby shaping how schools balance vertical compliance with horizontal problem-solving [25]–[27]. In practice, autonomy reforms can amplify workload and compliance pressures when monitoring systems reward reporting over learning and when discretionary resources remain limited [28], [29]. Under such conditions, governance becomes a constraint on improvement-oriented leadership rather than a platform enabling it [30]. Culture and leadership scholarship adds a third strand: norms surrounding hierarchy, face-saving, and conflict avoidance shape communication patterns, professional learning, initiative-taking, and the social legitimacy of change strategies. Recent work emphasizes that leadership is not merely technical—its effectiveness depends on whether leadership behaviors are perceived as legitimate and culturally congruent [31]–[33]. In parallel, research on digitally oriented reform capacity underscores that technology integration and innovation require supportive professional conditions and leadership-enabled capability building, not only policy mandates [34]–[36].

This paper argues that Myanmar’s reform outcomes are best explained not by isolating policy, governance, and culture as separate influences, but by examining how they interact to shape leaders’ room for maneuver and the legitimacy of reform enactment. Existing studies frequently foreground i) policy targets and design; ii) administrative structures and control; or iii) cultural barriers and enabling norms. What is less developed is an integrated explanation of how policy signals, governance arrangements, and cultural expectations dynamically combine to determine what leaders can plausibly do—and how leadership practice mediates these dynamics in real time. This gap matters because leadership development and reform support initiatives often borrow “best-practice” models without specifying the contextual conditions under which such practices are feasible, legitimate, and sustainable [37]. Figure 1 summarizes the proposed policy–governance–culture (PGC)–leadership mediation model and clarifies how transformational leadership mediates the interaction among policy intent, governance feasibility, and cultural legitimacy to shape reform enactment and downstream outcomes.

As shown in Figure 1, reform success depends not only on policy strength but also on whether leadership can reconcile three simultaneous demands: coherence with policy signals, feasibility within governance structures, and legitimacy within culturally grounded expectations. The model explains why the

same policy may yield different enactment patterns across schools: leaders vary in their capacity to translate policy into actionable routines, to navigate governance boundaries and resource constraints, and to embed change within locally acceptable communication and participation practices. These dynamics are especially consequential in hierarchical environments where initiative and feedback must be expressed through culturally legitimate forms to avoid symbolic compliance and maintain relational stability. This model is also framed as an evaluation-oriented diagnostic tool, specifying interpretable pathways and boundary conditions that can guide reform monitoring by distinguishing i) structural misalignment effects; ii) leadership buffering capacity; and iii) legitimacy-conditioned enactment dynamics.

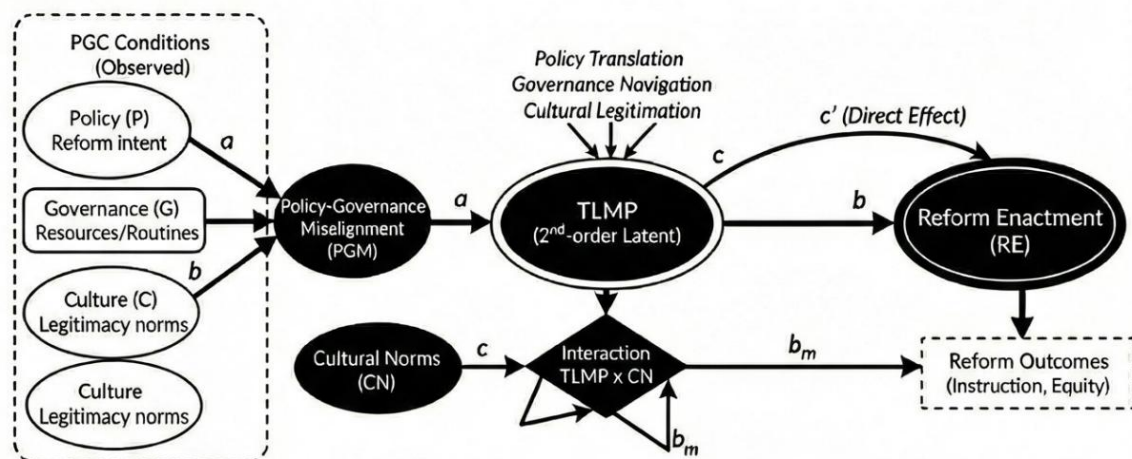


Figure 1. PGC-leadership mediation model of education reform enactment in Myanmar

Accordingly, this study advances three testable hypotheses:

- H1 (Misalignment → leadership mediation → enactment; compensatory mediation): higher perceived policy–governance misalignment (PGM) is associated with lower reform enactment (RE), while simultaneously being associated with stronger transformational leadership mediation practices (TLMP) that partially offset the enactment penalty via a positive indirect pathway (PGM → TLMP → RE).
- H2 (Cultural norms as a boundary condition): cultural norms (CN) moderate the association between TLMP and RE, such that the positive relationship between TLMP and enactment is stronger under higher legitimacy constraints.
- H3 (Moderated mediation): the indirect effect of PGM on RE via TLMP is conditional on CN, such that the mediated (buffering) pathway strengthens as CN increases.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Research design and procedures

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design anchored in hypothesis testing. The quantitative phase tested the proposed PGC-leadership mediation model (Figure 1) using a two-wave time-lag survey to reduce same-source, same-time inflation. Wave 1 captured PGM, TLMP, CN, and covariates; Wave 2 (administered 2–4 weeks later) captured RE. The qualitative phase followed preliminary quantitative modeling and used semi-structured interviews to clarify mechanisms aligned to policy translation, governance navigation, and cultural legitimation. To support interpretability and replicability, all constructs were operationalized to match the conceptual domains in Figure 1 (PGM; leadership mediation practices; CN; RE). The analysis proceeds in three steps: i) descriptive statistics and correlations; ii) measurement validation; and iii) multilevel structural tests of mediation, moderation, and moderated mediation.

Qualitative phase (mechanism clarification) and trustworthiness. After preliminary multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) results, semi-structured interviews were conducted with  $n=24$  informants, drawn from a purposive maximum-variation subsample of 12 schools representing contrasting quantitative profiles (4 schools per profile: high TLMP/high RE; high TLMP/low RE; low TLMP/low RE). Informants included school leaders and implementers (e.g., 6 principals, 8 middle leaders, and 10 teachers) to capture both mediation practice and enactment experience. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60

minutes and was conducted in a quiet, private setting at the participant's school or, when access and scheduling required, through a secure online meeting platform. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded; when audio-recording was not feasible, detailed written notes were taken during the interview and expanded immediately afterward. Interview prompts focused on three mechanism domains: policy translation, governance navigation, and cultural legitimation. Audio files and notes were transcribed into analyzable text and de-identified before coding. Trustworthiness was strengthened through i) a documented interview protocol and audit trail; ii) codebook-based thematic coding with peer debriefing and resolution of discrepancies; iii) member-checking of summarized interpretations where feasible; and iv) triangulation between quantitative patterns and qualitative themes using joint displays.

## 2.2. Setting, sampling, and criteria for inclusion and exclusion

The analytic design targets Myanmar's basic education reform context, where enactment is shaped by the interaction of policy signals, governance constraints, and culturally grounded legitimacy expectations. To reflect this context while maintaining methodological transparency, the study used a clustered school survey design to represent clustered school conditions (staff nested within schools) and reform implementation environments characterized by uneven support capacity and varying legitimacy constraints. Schools were eligible if they were i) basic education schools operating under the national curriculum; ii) actively engaged with reform-related directives/practices during the study period; and iii) able to provide access to teaching staff and middle leaders for survey participation. Respondents were eligible if they were teachers or middle leaders employed at the sampled school and had sufficient tenure to report on school routines (e.g.,  $\geq 6$  months). Responses were excluded if they were incomplete beyond prespecified thresholds or showed invalid patterns. A multi-stage sampling strategy was used to capture contextual variation in Myanmar's basic education reform setting. First, schools were stratified by level (primary/middle/high) and locality (urban/peri-urban/rural) to capture implementation heterogeneity. Second, schools within strata were selected as clusters, and staff within selected schools were invited to participate. The final sample comprised 48 schools and 720 usable responses (15 respondents/school), supporting multilevel inference. Stratum counts and response rates are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Stratum counts and response rates

| School level | Locality   | Schools (n) | Staff invited (n) | Usable responses (n) |
|--------------|------------|-------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Primary      | Urban      | 6           | 108               | 90                   |
| Primary      | Peri-urban | 5           | 90                | 75                   |
| Primary      | Rural      | 5           | 90                | 75                   |
| Middle       | Urban      | 6           | 108               | 90                   |
| Middle       | Peri-urban | 5           | 90                | 75                   |
| Middle       | Rural      | 5           | 90                | 75                   |
| High         | Urban      | 6           | 108               | 90                   |
| High         | Peri-urban | 5           | 90                | 75                   |
| High         | Rural      | 5           | 90                | 75                   |
| Total        |            | 48          | 864               | 720                  |

Notes: Overall usable response rate: 83.3% (720/864);

Response rate=usable responses÷staff invited×100.

## 2.3. Measures, data preparation, and analytic strategy

All constructs were operationalized to match the PGC–leadership mediation model. Where suitable measures were available, items were adapted to Myanmar's reform language and governance realities; where gaps existed, items were developed to capture context-specific mechanisms. The quantitative instrument included: PGM as a predictor capturing perceived mismatch between reform demands and governance support (authority, resources, procedural flexibility); TLMP as a mediator capturing leadership behaviors that translate policy into workable steps, navigate governance constraints, and secure cultural legitimacy; CN as a moderator capturing hierarchy acceptance and conflict avoidance shaping the legitimacy of leadership action; and RE as the primary outcome capturing implementation of reform-aligned practices (e.g., learner-centered pedagogy, collaborative planning, inclusive routines). Items were administered using a 5-point Likert format to support latent-variable modeling and interpretability. TLMP was modeled as a second-order construct with three first-order dimensions aligned to Figure 1: policy translation, governance navigation, and cultural legitimation. Translation and cultural adaptation followed a structured process: forward translation by bilingual education researchers, independent back-translation, expert review for content relevance and cultural appropriateness, and cognitive interviews with a small group of teachers/leaders to refine ambiguous wording.

Given the presence of mediation, moderation, and conditional indirect effects, a priori Monte Carlo simulations were used during study planning to evaluate design sensitivity and estimator stability under plausible field conditions (e.g., clustering and missingness), informing prespecified analysis decision rules. Prespecified inputs reflected small-to-moderate standardized path expectations, plausible clustering (intraclass correlation for RE in the 0.05–0.15 range), and missingness scenarios (5–15% item nonresponse, MAR). Simulations evaluated power for i) indirect effects (PGM→TLMP→RE) and ii) moderated mediation involving CN, using bootstrapped confidence interval coverage, convergence diagnostics, and nonconvergence thresholds. Decision rules were prespecified: if clustering was nontrivial (e.g., intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC)≥0.10 and design effect>2), analyses defaulted to MSEM; otherwise, single-level structural equation modeling (SEM) with cluster-robust standard errors was applied.

### 2.3.1. Data preparation and quality checks

Data screening addressed invalid response patterns (e.g., straight-lining), out-of-range values, and excessive missingness. Missing data were handled using full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) in SEM, with multiple imputation conducted as a robustness check. To assess potential common method bias, model-based sensitivity checks compared baseline measurement models against alternatives incorporating a latent method factor or marker-style specifications. Aggregation to the school level (where required for multilevel modeling or climate-like constructs) was conducted only when within-group agreement met prespecified thresholds (e.g., ICC and agreement indices), ensuring that school-level interpretations were justified empirically.

### 2.3.2. Analytical strategy

Measurement validity was evaluated via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), including testing the second-order structure of TLMP. Model fit was assessed using standard global fit indices (CFI/TLI, RMSEA, SRMR) alongside factor loadings and residual diagnostics. Reliability was assessed via composite reliability (CR) and omega; convergent/discriminant validity was evaluated via average variance extracted (AVE) and inter-factor relations. Hypotheses were tested using SEM/MSEM with appropriate estimators (MLR by default; WLSMV if item distributions warranted). H1 was evaluated via mediation (PGM→TLMP→RE) with bootstrapped confidence intervals for indirect effects. H2 was tested via interaction modeling (TLMP×CN→RE). H3 was tested as moderated mediation, estimating conditional indirect effects at low/mean/high levels of CN (−1 SD, mean, +1 SD). Models included theoretically justified covariates (e.g., school level, school size, leader tenure, locality, resourcing proxies). Robustness checks examined alternative operationalizations (e.g., latent vs. composite RE), alternative estimators, and stratified analyses by school level when sample size permitted.

### 2.3.3. Qualitative analysis and integration

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by the PGC domains. A codebook combined deductive categories (policy translation, governance navigation, cultural legitimation) with inductive themes (e.g., risk management, compliance signaling, informal negotiation). Integration occurred through joint displays and narrative weaving, linking quantitative patterns to mechanism explanations and clarifying why similar policy conditions yielded divergent enactment outcomes across sites. Ethical approval was obtained from an appropriate ethics review body prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured from all participants, and confidentiality was protected through de-identification, secure data storage, and reporting practices designed to prevent the identification of any schools or individuals in light of contextual sensitivities.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Dataset and data quality checks

The final analytic sample comprised 48 schools (J=48) and 720 respondents (N=720), primarily teachers and middle leaders, with an average cluster size of approximately 15 respondents per school. Item responses were captured using a 5-point Likert-type scale, where higher values indicate stronger presence of the focal construct (for PGM, higher values indicate stronger perceived misalignment). Item-level missingness was 9.8%. Following the prespecified analysis plan, missing data were handled using FIML within the SEM framework under a missing-at-random assumption. Clustering diagnostics indicated meaningful between-school variance in the primary outcome, RE, with an ICC of 0.11 and a design effect exceeding 2. As this satisfied the prespecified decision rule for multilevel estimation, hypothesis testing proceeded using MSEM. Data screening did not reveal anomalous response patterns or out-of-range values, and distributions showed reasonable central tendency and dispersion across constructs.

### 3.2. Descriptive statistics and bivariate associations

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the four focal constructs: PGM, TLMP, CN, and RE. Across the sample, mean levels clustered in the mid-to-upper range of the response scale; importantly, the standard deviations indicate meaningful dispersion across respondents, and the correlation pattern provides an interpretable descriptive basis for subsequent multilevel hypothesis tests.

The correlation pattern was consistent with the theoretical logic of the proposed framework. PGM was negatively associated with RE, suggesting that perceived misalignment between reform expectations and governance support corresponds to weaker enactment. At the same time, PGM showed a positive association with TLMP, indicating a compensatory pattern in which misalignment is accompanied by increased leadership mediation effort. Across the sample, mean levels clustered in the mid-to-upper range of the response scale; importantly, the standard deviations and correlation pattern indicate meaningful dispersion and between-case differentiation consistent with heterogeneous enactment conditions rather than uniform ceiling effects. CN showed comparatively small bivariate associations with the other constructs, which is theoretically plausible given its role as a boundary condition rather than a direct driver of enactment. Collectively, these associations provided an initial descriptive basis for the subsequent multilevel hypothesis tests.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations (N=720)

| Variable | Mean | SD   | 1        | 2       | 3     | 4    |
|----------|------|------|----------|---------|-------|------|
| 1. PGM   | 4.36 | 0.92 | 1.00     |         |       |      |
| 2. TLMP  | 4.88 | 0.79 | 0.24***  | 1.00    |       |      |
| 3. CN    | 4.91 | 0.83 | 0.12**   | 0.10**  | 1.00  |      |
| 4. RE    | 4.52 | 0.86 | -0.18*** | 0.38*** | -0.06 | 1.00 |

Note: All variables are measured on 5 Likert-type scales (higher scores indicate stronger presence of the construct). Entries are Pearson correlations. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

### 3.3. Measurement model, structural results, and hypothesis tests

Measurement validity was evaluated prior to structural modeling. The CFA supported the prespecified latent structure for PGM, CN, and RE, and the second-order specification of TLMP with three first-order dimensions—policy translation, governance navigation, and cultural legitimation. As summarized in Table 3, standardized factor loadings fell within acceptable ranges across constructs, and reliability estimates (omega and composite reliability) indicated strong internal consistency. Convergent validity was supported by AVE values meeting or exceeding common benchmarks across constructs, and the overall model fit indices indicated acceptable-to-strong fit for the measurement model. These results justified proceeding to hypothesis testing using the latent variables.

Table 3. Measurement quality summary (CFA; N=720)

| Construct               | Items    | Std. loading range | McDonald's omega ( $\omega$ ) | CR   | AVE  |
|-------------------------|----------|--------------------|-------------------------------|------|------|
| PGM                     | 6        | 0.62–0.81          | 0.85                          | 0.86 | 0.52 |
| TLMP, 2nd-order         | 12 (3×4) | 0.64–0.87          | 0.91                          | 0.92 | 0.57 |
| └ Policy translation    | 4        | 0.67–0.86          | 0.88                          | 0.89 | 0.58 |
| └ Governance navigation | 4        | 0.64–0.84          | 0.86                          | 0.87 | 0.54 |
| └ Cultural legitimation | 4        | 0.66–0.87          | 0.89                          | 0.90 | 0.60 |
| CN                      | 6        | 0.60–0.79          | 0.83                          | 0.84 | 0.50 |
| RE                      | 8        | 0.61–0.85          | 0.88                          | 0.89 | 0.53 |

Note: Std. loading range refers to standardized factor loadings for items on their intended latent construct. TLMP is specified as a second-order factor with three first-order dimensions (4 items each).

Figure 2 displays the estimated structural model with standardized coefficients derived from the MSEM analysis. The model visually summarizes the hypothesized relationships among PGM, TLMP, CN, and RE. Specifically, the diagram presents the mediated pathway from PGM to RE through TLMP, corresponding to H1, alongside the direct effect of PGM on RE. It also illustrates the moderating effect of CN on the relationship between TLMP and RE, as proposed in H2. Taken together, these paths indicate a conditional indirect process, supporting the moderated mediation logic specified in H3.

Table 4 reports the full set of MSEM estimates for H1–H3. The a-path (PGM→TLMP) was positive and statistically significant, indicating that greater perceived misalignment corresponded to stronger leadership mediation practices. The b-path (TLMP→RE) was also positive and significant, supporting the claim that leadership mediation practices are associated with stronger RE. The direct effect of PGM on

RE ( $c'$ ) was negative and significant, indicating that misalignment carries an enactment penalty even after accounting for leadership mediation. Importantly, the indirect effect ( $ab$ ) was positive and statistically significant, demonstrating partial mediation: leadership mediation practices offset part of the negative association between misalignment and enactment, but do not eliminate it entirely. This pattern supports H1 and is consistent with the model's "compensatory mediation" logic.

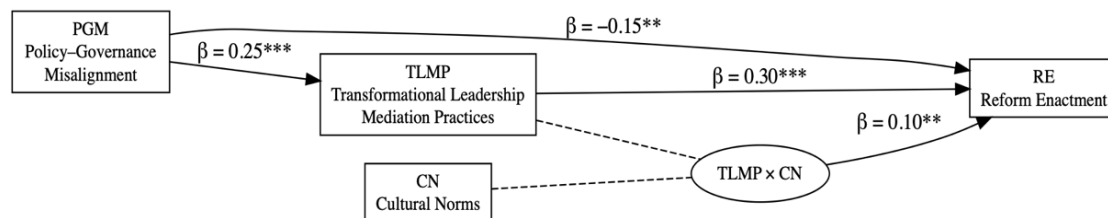


Figure 2. Estimated structural model (standardized coefficients)

Table 4. MSEM results for H1–H3 (N=720; J=48 schools)

| Path/Effect                                         | Estimate ( $\beta$ ) | SE    | 95% CI         | p     |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------|----------------|-------|
| PGM $\rightarrow$ TLMP (a path)                     | 0.25                 | 0.04  | [0.17, 0.33]   | <.001 |
| TLMP $\rightarrow$ RE (b path)                      | 0.30                 | 0.05  | [0.20, 0.40]   | <.001 |
| PGM $\rightarrow$ RE (direct, $c'$ )                | -0.15                | 0.05  | [-0.25, -0.05] | .003  |
| TLMP $\times$ CN $\rightarrow$ RE (interaction; H2) | 0.10                 | 0.03  | [0.04, 0.16]   | .001  |
| Indirect effect (H1): $a \times b$                  | 0.075                | 0.018 | [0.041, 0.112] | <.001 |
| Total effect: $c' + (a \times b)$                   | -0.075               | —     | —              | —     |

Moderation results further indicated that CN significantly moderated the TLMP $\rightarrow$ RE relationship. The interaction term (TLMP $\times$ CN) was positive and significant, implying that the association between leadership mediation and enactment becomes stronger as CN emphasizing hierarchy and conflict avoidance intensify. Substantively, this suggests that transformational mediation is most effective when leadership practices incorporate culturally legitimate enactment strategies under stronger legitimacy constraints, supporting H2. Because CN moderated the b-path, the mediation process became conditional, yielding moderated mediation consistent with H3. Conditional indirect effects increased across low, mean, and high levels of CN, indicating that the compensatory role of leadership mediation strengthens as hierarchical and conflict-avoidant norms become more salient. In practical terms, this pattern implies that leadership mediation matters most in contexts where cultural legitimacy constraints heighten the need for face-sensitive communication, relational trust-building, and consultation that preserves role expectations. To make the moderation effect visually interpretable, Figure 3 plots the association between TLMP and RE at low versus high levels of CN. The plotted slopes show a steeper TLMP $\rightarrow$ RE relationship under high CN than under low CN, consistent with the positive interaction term and confirming that cultural context conditions the effectiveness of leadership mediation practices in shaping enactment.

Overall, the findings provide coherent support for the proposed PGC–leadership mediation model. PGM exhibited a direct negative relationship with RE, while leadership mediation practices partially offset this penalty through a positive indirect pathway. CN functioned as a meaningful boundary condition, strengthening the effect of leadership mediation on enactment and producing a conditional indirect effect consistent with moderated mediation. This pattern aligns with the study's central claim that transformational leadership operates as a mediating practice that reconciles policy intent, governance feasibility, and cultural legitimacy to shape RE and outcomes.

### 3.4. Qualitative results

Across interviews, participants consistently described RE as a negotiated process shaped by how leaders interpret policy demands, manage procedural constraints, and secure legitimacy in school communities. Three themes emerged that map directly onto the PGC mechanism logic in Figure 1: policy translation into workable priorities, governance navigation under resource and compliance pressure, and cultural legitimation to reduce resistance and protect face. Collectively, these themes explain why the quantitative model shows a negative direct effect of PGM on enactment, alongside a compensatory indirect pathway through TLMP.

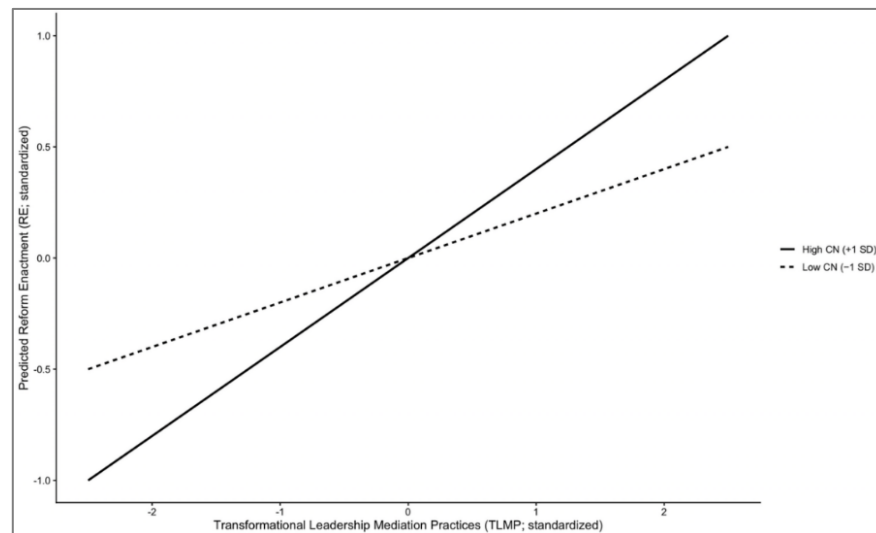


Figure 3. Interaction plot: effect of TLMP on RE at low vs. high CN

### 3.4.1. Theme 1: policy translation as “sensemaking for action”

Participants emphasized that misaligned or ambiguous directives required leaders to reduce complexity into concrete routines that teachers could implement without constant reinterpretation. Leaders were described as filtering policy signals, clarifying “what counts,” and aligning expectations across departments to prevent fragmented enactment. One middle leader noted: “*when policies change quickly, teachers don’t resist the goal—they resist the confusion. Our role is to translate the policy into steps that fit the timetable and the classroom reality.*” Another teacher explained that enactment improved when leaders “*turned policy language into a checklist that matched our teaching cycle,*” suggesting that policy translation strengthens implementation readiness even when upstream coherence is weak.

### 3.4.2. Theme 2: governance navigation and cultural legitimization as legitimacy work

Respondents reported that implementation frequently stalled when governance routines (approvals, reporting, resource allocation, inspection cycles) conflicted with school-level capacity. Leaders therefore acted as brokers—negotiating flexibility, reallocating resources, and sequencing requirements to protect teaching time. At the same time, CN shaped whether leadership actions were accepted as legitimate. Participants described the need to communicate reforms in ways that preserved harmony and avoided public blame. A teacher shared: “*people will follow, but only if they feel respected. If leaders push too hard, teachers comply on paper but not in practice.*” A principal-level participant similarly stated: “*we need to introduce change without making anyone lose face; otherwise, resistance becomes silent.*” These accounts align with the quantitative moderation results by illustrating how stronger legitimacy constraints amplify the importance of leadership mediation for translating misalignment into enactment.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Recap of purpose and model (PGC–leadership mediation model; H1–H3)

This study examined whether and how PGM shapes RE in Myanmar, and whether TLMP buffer this effect under culturally bounded legitimacy norms. Evidence comes from a two-wave time-lag clustered school survey (48 schools; N=720) analyzed with validated measurement models and multilevel SEM, complemented by mechanism-oriented interviews. Misalignment reduced enactment directly, but increased leadership mediation practices that partially offset this penalty; the buffering pathway strengthened as cultural legitimacy constraints intensified. The results reframe transformational leadership as alignment-building mediation (translation–navigation–legitimation) and provide an evaluation-oriented diagnostic for distinguishing structural misalignment from leadership capacity and legitimacy conditions. The findings provide a coherent pattern consistent with the PGC–leadership mediation model. At the descriptive level, PGM showed a negative association with RE ( $r=-0.18$ ), while TLMP was positively associated with RE ( $r=0.38$ ), suggesting that misalignment is an implementation burden whereas mediation practices are enactment-enabling (Table 2). Measurement results indicated that the constructs were empirically usable for hypothesis testing, with strong reliability and acceptable fit (CFI=0.956; TLI=0.948; RMSEA=0.044;

SRMR=0.041) and robust loading ranges (Table 3). Structurally, the multilevel diagnostics (ICC for RE=0.11) supported the prespecified shift to MSEM, which is important because RE plausibly varies across schools as organizational contexts rather than purely individual perceptions.

## 4.2. Interpretation of key effects

### 4.2.1. Compensatory mediation (H1)

The results support a form of mediation best interpreted as compensatory rather than fully restorative. PGM retained a negative direct association with enactment ( $c' = -0.15$ ,  $p = .003$ ), indicating that when policy expectations exceed governance supports—decision rights, resources, and procedural flexibility—schools face a measurable enactment penalty (Table 4). At the same time, PGM was positively associated with TLMP ( $a = 0.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and TLMP was positively associated with enactment ( $b = 0.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The indirect effect was positive and statistically significant ( $ab = 0.075$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that leaders' mediation work offsets part of the negative effect of misalignment. However, the total effect remained negative ( $-0.075$ ), meaning that leadership buffers misalignment but does not eliminate it. This interpretation is consistent with policy enactment research showing that reform is translated rather than mechanically implemented, and that implementation outcomes depend heavily on how local actors interpret and reconstruct policy under contextual constraints [19]–[21]. It also aligns with collective sensemaking scholarship suggesting that policy coherence and practical relevance shape whether reform is enacted as meaningful improvement or reduced to administrative compliance [22], [23]. In governance terms, the present findings resonate with studies showing that autonomy and accountability reforms often generate implementation strain when formal decentralization is not matched by usable authority, resources, or supportive monitoring arrangements [7]–[15]. The compensatory role of TLMP in this study further extends leadership research by showing that transformational leadership matters not merely as a motivational style, but as practical mediation work through which leaders translate policy into actionable routines, navigate system constraints, and sustain implementation effort under fragile conditions [24]–[30].

### 4.2.2. Moderation and conditionality (H2–H3)

CN functioned as a meaningful boundary condition rather than a dominant bivariate driver, which is consistent with the modest correlations involving CN in Table 2. In the structural model, CN significantly moderated the TLMP→RE path (interaction  $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p = .001$ ), indicating that TLMP is more strongly associated with enactment as hierarchical and conflict-avoidant norms intensify (Table 4; Figure 3). This result should not be interpreted as suggesting that hierarchy itself improves reform outcomes; rather, it indicates that legitimacy constraints alter the conditions under which leadership mediation becomes effective. This interpretation is consistent with recent scholarship emphasizing that leadership effectiveness is culturally situated and depends on whether leadership actions are perceived as legitimate, relationally appropriate, and contextually congruent [31]–[33]. It also aligns with work showing that school leaders' influence is enacted through everyday interactional practices that shape motivation, trust, meaning-making, and willingness to engage in change [24], [25]. Related evidence further suggests that transformational leadership supports innovation, school culture, resilience, and teacher commitment more strongly when leaders create psychologically and professionally safe conditions for participation [28]–[30], [33], [35].

In the present study, this helps explain why TLMP had a stronger enactment payoff under higher CN: in contexts where direct confrontation, rapid redistribution of authority, or open dissent is culturally costly, enactment depends more heavily on face-sensitive communication, respectful consultation, and culturally legitimate coalition-building. Because CN moderated the b-path, the mediation became conditional, which is the substantive core of H3. The implied pattern is that the indirect pathway (PGM→TLMP→RE) strengthens as legitimacy constraints rise: when CN is higher, the enactment gains associated with TLMP are larger. This finding extends prior leadership and culture research by showing not only that culture shapes reform conditions, but that it also conditions the strength of the indirect leadership pathway linking structural misalignment to school-level enactment outcomes [31]–[33]. This supports the model's claim that leadership mediation is most consequential precisely in the contexts where change is hardest to legitimate. Put differently, leaders' capacity to produce culturally acceptable movement becomes a key mechanism through which governance-constrained reforms can still be enacted as improvement rather than reduced to compliance routines.

## 4.3. Contributions

The study's primary contribution is to shift explanation from single-factor accounts—policy design alone, governance alone, or culture alone—toward an integrated view of enactment as an interaction problem. The empirical pattern in Table 4 supports a layered logic: governance misalignment depresses enactment directly, yet simultaneously activates leadership mediation effort, which partially offsets

implementation losses. This interaction framing helps explain why reforms can show pockets of progress without system-wide consistency: schools with stronger mediation capacity can buffer misalignment more effectively, producing uneven enactment across contexts. In this respect, the study complements prior work on enactment, decentralization, and autonomy-with-accountability by showing that implementation gaps are not only policy-design failures, but also alignment failures across governance architecture, organizational interpretation, and culturally legitimate leadership action [13]–[21].

A second contribution is conceptual. Rather than treating transformational leadership as a generalized style, the findings support a practice-oriented construct—TLMP—that does three kinds of work under reform pressure: translating policy into workable steps, navigating governance constraints, and legitimating change culturally. This extends the broader transformational leadership literature, which has linked leadership to teacher motivation, innovation, school culture, and resilience [24]–[35], by specifying a more context-sensitive mediation function in reform settings. The practical implications are equally clear. For leadership development, the findings suggest that leaders should be trained not only in vision-setting or instructional supervision, but also in policy translation, governance navigation, and culturally responsive legitimation. This recommendation is consistent with prior evidence that reform leadership becomes more effective when leaders can facilitate sensemaking, build trust, and adapt change processes to local professional cultures [22], [23], [25], [31], [32]. For policy and governance design, the results reinforce that leadership should not be treated as a substitute for coherent implementation architecture. Studies of school autonomy, decentralization, and governance reform repeatedly show that reforms become fragile when accountability demands are not matched by usable authority, role clarity, and practical support [7]–[17]. The present study adds that even strong leadership mediation cannot fully compensate for persistent structural misalignment. Finally, the moderation effect suggests that legitimacy should be treated as a reform resource rather than merely a constraint. In higher-hierarchy settings, participation and professional learning may need to be staged through face-preserving and relationally safe forms of engagement, which echoes recent work on culturally congruent leadership and crisis-sensitive school leadership [31], [32]. Together, these implications position the PGC–leadership mediation model as a useful evaluation framework for diagnosing whether weak enactment is driven primarily by PGM, insufficient leadership mediation capacity, or unresolved legitimacy constraints. Repositioning transformational leadership as mediation practice. The coefficients in Table 4 provide a clear logic chain for this repositioning: misalignment predicts mediation effort (a-path), mediation predicts enactment (b-path), and the mediation payoff is larger under stronger legitimacy constraints (interaction).

#### 4.4. Implications for leadership development and school-level practice

The effect sizes suggest that leadership capacity-building should explicitly train leaders for mediation under constraints, not only for instructional technique. Where misalignment is present, leaders need capabilities for i) policy translation—turning broad directives into staged priorities, routines, and short-cycle feedback; ii) governance navigation—securing permissions, mobilizing resources, and framing innovation as policy fulfillment rather than authority challenge; and iii) cultural legitimation—using trust-building and face-sensitive influence so that professional learning and experimentation become socially safe. The moderation pattern reinforces that this third element is not “soft add-on,” but a condition that amplifies the impact of mediation practices on enactment. Implications for policy and governance design. The compensatory mediation pattern yields a straightforward message: if misalignment persists, leadership becomes a compensatory mechanism—useful but insufficient. The negative direct effect of PGM ( $c' = -0.15$ ) indicates that systems should reduce avoidable misalignment structurally by aligning targets with decision rights, role clarity, resources, and implementation guidance. Doing so reduces the need for constant translation and negotiation at the school level and improves the probability that enactment becomes routine rather than leader-dependent. In practical terms, reform packages should specify what schools may adapt versus must comply with, provide workable toolkits, and build feedback loops that allow governance to learn from enactment realities rather than enforcing compliance signals that mask implementation fragility.

From an evaluation standpoint, the framework provides a logic for identifying whether weak enactment is primarily driven by misalignment (PGM), insufficient mediation capacity (TLMP), or legitimacy constraints (CN), supporting more targeted reform adjustments rather than generic compliance-based responses. Cultural implications: legitimacy as a reform resource. The interaction effect suggests that legitimacy is not simply a “constraint” but also a design parameter: reforms move when leaders can frame change in culturally acceptable ways. In high-hierarchy contexts, participatory change may need to be staged through protected micro-spaces (e.g., department teams, lesson study groups) where voice increases gradually and feedback is delivered in face-preserving forms. This implies that reform support should include culturally responsive facilitation methods rather than importing participation models that presume low power distance and high tolerance for direct critique.

The novelty of this study lies in developing and testing the PGC leadership mediation model as a context-responsive explanation of education reform enactment in Myanmar. Rather than treating policy, governance, culture, and transformational leadership as separate explanatory strands, the model integrates them into a conditional mediation framework that clarifies how leadership buffers structural misalignment under legitimacy constraints. In this way, the study reconceptualizes transformational leadership as a mediating practice of policy translation, governance navigation, and cultural legitimation rather than as a decontextualized leadership style. This contribution strengthens both theory and evaluation practice by offering a diagnostic framework for identifying whether enactment failure is driven mainly by policy–governance incoherence, weak leadership mediation, or culturally unresolved implementation conditions.

#### 4.5. Limitations and future research

These conclusions should be interpreted with three boundaries in mind. First, although the dataset supports rigorous model testing, the findings should not be generalized beyond the studied context without replication across additional school types and regions. Mean levels for TLMP and CN were high, suggesting potential ceiling effects and/or social desirability bias; future studies should incorporate stronger anonymity assurances, indirect questioning, and behavioral/administrative indicators to triangulate leadership mediation and CN. Second, measurement transferability remains an empirical question: even with strong CFA properties in Table 3, key constructs (e.g., CN and PGM) should be further examined for measurement invariance across school levels, geographic settings, and administrative conditions to ensure comparability. Third, while the two-wave design strengthens temporal ordering, causal inference would still benefit from longer longitudinal follow-ups, quasi-experimental variation in governance supports, and the inclusion of more objective enactment indicators (e.g., observation-based rubrics and document-derived implementation indices). Future research should therefore extend multilevel data collection across wider jurisdictions, test whether alternative cultural dimensions condition the moderated pathway differently, and examine whether interventions that strengthen policy–governance coherence reduce reliance on compensatory leadership mediation over time.

### 5. CONCLUSION

This study advanced a context-responsive explanation of education reform enactment in Myanmar by proposing and testing the PGC–leadership mediation model, which conceptualizes transformational leadership as a mediating practice operating at the intersection of policy intent, governance feasibility, and cultural legitimacy. The findings support the central premise that reform enactment cannot be adequately understood by examining policy, governance, culture, or leadership in isolation; rather, enactment emerges from the dynamic alignment—or misalignment—among these domains and the mediating work leaders perform to translate reform intent into feasible and legitimate school-level practice. Across the hypothesis tests, three conclusions follow. First, consistent with H1, PGM retained a negative direct association with reform enactment ( $c' < 0$ ), while also predicting stronger leadership mediation practices that produced a positive indirect effect ( $ab > 0$ ); substantively, transformational mediation buffered—but did not eliminate—the enactment penalty associated with systemic incoherence, leaving the total effect net negative. Second, consistent with H2, cultural norms moderated the association between leadership mediation practices and enactment (positive interaction), indicating that the enactment payoff of transformational mediation is contingent on legitimacy conditions rather than technique alone. Third, consistent with H3, the mediation pathway was conditional: the indirect effect strengthened at higher levels of cultural legitimacy constraint, underscoring that culturally attuned mediation becomes more consequential as hierarchical and conflict-avoidant norms intensify. Taken together, these results imply that transformational leadership in Myanmar's reform context is best developed as alignment-building work—policy translation, governance navigation, and cultural legitimation—while also reinforcing that sustainable progress cannot rely on leadership compensation alone. Therefore, leadership development should be paired with policy and governance design reforms that reduce avoidable misalignment by clarifying decision rights, aligning accountability with support, and providing implementation resources that enable schools to enact change without continual improvisation.

Future research should replicate and extend the model across additional regions and school levels, test measurement invariance of the PGC constructs, and apply longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs to strengthen causal inference. Findings should be interpreted within three limits: i) generalizability beyond the sampled school contexts requires replication across additional regions and school types; ii) self-report measures may inflate construct means and introduce social desirability, so future work should triangulate with observational, administrative, or document-based enactment indicators; and iii) the two-wave lag improves temporal ordering but does not fully establish causality, warranting longer longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs and measurement-invariance testing across strata.

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| Chi Che        | ✓ | ✓ | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓  | ✓  | ✓ | ✓  |
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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

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Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was ethically reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board/Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection. All participants provided informed consent, participation was voluntary, and data were handled confidentially with secure storage and restricted access in line with the approved protocol.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [CC], upon reasonable request. The dataset contains information that could compromise participant privacy and institutional confidentiality; therefore, it is not publicly available.

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