INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIPS OF AUTONOMY IN DECISION-MAKING, EMPOWERMENT, AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP WITH SOCIO-PROFESSIONAL VARIABLES: A STUDY ABOUT PUBLIC SCHOOL LEADERS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the school leaders' autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership. Furthermore, it finds out their relationships with socio-professional variables i.e. gender, age, academic qualification, teaching experience, and leadership experience. Using quantitative method, data was gathered through questionnaires. The sample consisted of 252 school leaders belonging to five different cities in Pakistan, The school leaders reported the highest mean value in empowerment (4.04), followed by school leadership (3.67) and autonomy in decision-making (3.63). When it came to correlational analysis; gender, academic qualification, and leadership experience did not have a statistically significant relationship with autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, or school leadership. Age and teaching experience turned out to be the most influential as they had a statistically significant correlation with autonomy in decision-making and empowerment. These findings were a little surprising as both age and teaching experience had a statistically significant correlation with autonomy in decision-making and empowerment, but leadership experience did not. The study suggests that school leaders in Pakistan should be provided with more autonomy in decision-making and empowerment so that they can play a better and more effective role in school development.

KEYWORDS
Autonomy, decision-making, empowerment, experience, Pakistan, school leadership

INTRODUCTION
Effective school systems are the backbone of the social and economic development of any country (Riddell, 2006). Multiple factors contribute to effective and successful schools. One of the most important factors is school leadership (Sergiovanni, 2007). Malik and Azmat (2019) said that "leaders play a key role in helping an organization in meeting its goals" (p. 20). Hoy and Smith (2007) found the principal to be the most significant factor in the development and effectiveness of any school. An effective leader promotes the culture of learning and empowers teachers to become leaders in their own capacity which leads to a culture of responsibility and learning (Fullan et al., 2005). Fullan (2002) has gone as far as to conclude that "effective school leaders are key to large-scale, sustainable education reform."

Nowadays, school leaders have to perform an increasing number of roles. Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) reviewed the empirical literature on school leaders. They identified 121 practices that a school leader had to perform. A school leader has to skillfully balance the management of the school with developing an environment of care and trust to inspire the employee to achieve the goals of the school (Healy, 2009). These increasingly long lists of practices, roles, and responsibilities prompt a concern that school leaders are not only being pulled in many different directions but also being asked to do too much. An effective school leader in these circumstances not only needs to be skilled, knowledgeable, and understanding; but also have a high level of empowerment and autonomy in decision-making.

Organizational theorists have long argued that organizational efficiency can be greatly enhanced by providing them with professional autonomy and decision-making power (Luthans, 1992). As school leaders are often responsible for teachers' selection, promotion, and professional development, students' learning and academic achievement, and the overall performance of the schools; they need autonomy and empowerment to manage and lead effectively. In England, a great emphasis is placed on leadership and autonomy as the drivers of educational improvement (Woods et al., 2021). Very few studies about this have been carried out on public school leaders in Pakistan. This study tries to fill this research gap by investigating public school leaders' autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership; and their relationships with the leaders' socio-professional variables.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The literature review for this study is divided into four main themes. Those themes and their details are given below.

School Leadership: Role and Importance
Leaders play one of the most important roles in any institution's downfall or success (Malik & Azmat, 2019). Numerous studies have highlighted the role and importance of leadership in the growth and performance of a school (Leithwood et al., 2010). The concept of leadership is explained differently across different cultures and theoretical beliefs. In some cases, leadership has been described as a process, but most theories and research on leadership look at a person in a leadership role to gain an understanding of it (Fiedler, 1967; House & Mitchell, 1975; Drath & Palus, 1994). School leaders play a key role in managing the school effectively (Leithwood, 1994), improving the quality of education (Vaillant, 2015) and students' outcomes (Day et al., 2008), and increasing teachers' motivation and performance (Mahaputra & Saputra, 2021). Different policies and reforms acknowledged their role and importance in school improvement. In their study, Branch et al. (2013) found that effective school leaders improve the academic achievement of an average student "by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year" (p. 1). Ineffective leaders lower academic achievement in the same way. "No Child Left Behind" policy also recommends that the leaders in consistently low-performing schools should be replaced (Behind, 2002). This shows the immense role and importance of a school leader in not only bringing the quality up but also dragging it down.

Autonomy in Decision-making: Role and Importance
Organizational theorists have long argued that organizational efficiency may be enhanced by augmenting employees' professional autonomy by granting them greater decision-making power in their daily activities (Luthans, 1992). Therefore, institutions such as schools have supported the increase in professional autonomy (Huber et al., 1993). Usually, schools and school leaders in developed countries enjoy higher level of autonomy than those in the developing ones (Hanushek et al. 2013).

Tinh (2021) concluded that one of the ways to improve the quality of public high schools is to gradually increase school autonomy. Wohlstetter and Mohrman (1993) found that principals who had the autonomy to select the schools they wanted to work at, were more likely to invest their time, energies, and efforts in the growth and development of the school and its students. However, there is a debate about how much autonomy school leaders should enjoy (Eck & Goodwin, 2010). Too much autonomy and control may be at the cost of accountability while too little autonomy may stifle creativity.

Studies indicate that often public school leaders have less autonomy than private school ones (Gawlik, 2008). Thompson et al. (2021) found that public high school head teachers wanted to have more autonomy as they had been promised in educational policies and reforms.

Empowerment: Role and Importance
The concept of empowerment has gradually gained momentum in theory and practice since the Second World War. Workers' empowerment has been positively related to enhanced job performance, increased job satisfaction, greater work efficiency, and higher motivation (Tseo & Ramos, 1995). Abukhait et al. (2019) found that a sense of empowerment has a strong and significant impact on the employee's innovative behaviors.

The empowerment of school leaders and teachers leads to improved educational quality and school environment (Addi-Raccah, 2009; Flaherty, 2018). Hoyle et al. (1998) believed that sense of empowerment could be crucial to the success and effectiveness of a school leader. Literature has been repeatedly talking about the empowering behavior of school leaders and its positive effects on teachers' performance and school quality (Davis & Wilson, 2000). School leaders can empower the teachers only when they themselves are empowered and have the authority to do so.

Autonomy in Decision-making, Empowerment, and School Leadership in Pakistan
There have been quite a few studies about school leadership in Pakistan (Salfi, 2011; Niazi, 2012; Hussain & Awan, 2018); however, studies about autonomy in decision-making and empowerment in the context of school leadership are quite rare. Niazi (2012) highlighted the role and importance of school leaders in Pakistan. Salfi (2011) also found that school leaders in Pakistan were playing a key role in school improvement. They had developed a shared vision and were willing to empower teachers for school improvement. Hussain and Awan (2018) conducted a study using quantitative design to compare the overall teaching and administration quality in public and private schools. They found that public school teachers had better school administration and management experiences than private school teachers.

Simkins et al. (2003) conducted a study about school leaders in Pakistan. They found that other than expectations from society and personal traits, power and accountability also played a vital role in their success as school leaders. Niqab et al. (2014) found that bureaucratic system was one of the biggest hurdles that prevented the public school leaders in Pakistan from gaining the desired level of autonomy and empowerment which in turn affected their performance and effectiveness.
Studies have shown that school leadership, empowerment, and autonomy have a positive impact on the quality of education and school development. It creates a sense of ownership and responsibility that motivates them which is often trickled down to other persons at school.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
1. To investigate the level of autonomy in decision-making for public school leaders in Pakistan.
2. To investigate the level of empowerment for public school leaders in Pakistan.
3. To investigate the level of school leadership for public schools in Pakistan.
4. To find out the relationship between public school leaders' socio-professional variables with the study variables (autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Research Design
This study uses descriptive and correlational method within quantitative research approach. As there have not been a lot of studies about school leaders' empowerment and autonomy in Pakistan, it gathers descriptive data to get to know the situation. Later, correlational analyses are conducted to find the relationship between school leaders' socio-professional background and study variables (school leadership, autonomy in decision-making, and empowerment).

Population and Sample
The population of the study consists of public sector secondary school leaders belonging to Punjab, Pakistan. According to School Information System (Punjab, n.d.), there are 1,912 posts of principals. Out of which 939 are filled and 973 await posting or recruitment. Those 939 school leaders were taken as the target population of the study.

The sample was selected using a random sampling technique. Krejcie and Morgan (1970) suggested a sample size of 269 for a population of 939. Anticipating a low return rate, questionnaires were sent to 500 school leaders. 252 returned the questionnaires, indicating a return rate of 50.4%. All of them were used in data analysis.

Research Instrument
 The questionnaire was divided into four parts: leaders' socio-professional
background, school leadership, autonomy in decision-making, and empowerment. Leaders' socio-professional background consists of six questions about gender, location, age group, academic qualification, teaching experience, and leadership experience.

The second part is about school leadership. It is based on the work of Dussault et al. (2013). It consists of three main factors/ leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. This part consists of 15 items.

The third and fourth parts are about autonomy in decision-making and empowerment. Both of them are based on School Empowerment Scale developed by Short and Rinehart (1992). Original scale was modified as per the need and the context of the study. Autonomy in decision-making consists of 15 items, and empowerment of 22 items.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument
The instrument was sent to five experts (two in school education, one in leadership, and two in scale development) for content validity. Based on their feedback, some changes were made to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire approved by the experts was statistically tested for scale development and validation (Table 1). Two different data sets were used for this purpose (n=127 and n=135). Those samples were not used for the main study.

Table 1: *Statistical Analysis for Scale Development and Validation*

Measures	Item	Factor Loadings	KMO	Bartlett's test of Sphericity	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained	Cronbach Alpha
Autonomy in Decision-making	15	.369-.819	.924	1829.8 P=.000	6.850	45.67	.90
Empowerment	22	.536-775	.936	2215.98 P=.000	10.35	47.073	.945
Laissez-faire	7	.30-718	.666	144.26 P=.000	1.982	28.42	.490
Transformational	4	.574-.763	.678	120.32, p=.000	1.989	47.62	.628
Transactional	4	.674-.857	.622	166.54 P=.000	1.91	63.62	.833

The final questionnaire titled Questionnaire for School Leadership, Autonomy in Decision-making, and Empowerment (QSLADE) consists of 58 items (5 for backgrounds, 15 for leadership, 15 for autonomy in decision-making, and 22 for empowerment).

Data Collection and Analysis
As the researchers wanted to gather data from different parts of the Punjab province, it was done through both snail and electronic mail. Hard copies of QSLADE were sent

to school addresses, and also put on Google forms. Its link was sent to the sample through email addresses

This study uses both descriptive and inferential statistics. For descriptive statistics, mean and standard deviation were used. For correlation analysis, t test and ANOVA were used. SPSS 21 was used for those statistical tests.

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS
Socio-professional Background of the Sample
The sample consisted of 141 male (56%) and 111 (44%) female school leaders. They belonged to five different districts of Punjab: Lahore (n=41, 16.3%), Rawalpindi (n=35, 13.9%), Mianwali (n=93, 36.9%), Rajanpur (n=71, 28.2%), and Rahim Yar Khan (n=12, 4.8%).

They had different academic qualifications. Most of them (n=180, 71.4%) had master's degrees. Sixty (23.8%) were M.Phil, 9 (3.6%) bachelor (14 years of education), and 3 (1.2%) Ph.D. Based on their age, they were divided into four different age groups: Age group 1 (less than 30 years of age; n=24, 9.5%), age group 2 (30 to 40 years of age; n=89, 35.3%), age group 3 (41 to 50 years of age; n=65, 25.8%), and age group 4 (more than 50 years of age; n=74, 29.4%).

The final two socio-professional variables were about the school leaders' experiences: first about teaching experience, and second about leadership experience (experience as head). According to the responses of the participants, 82 school leaders (32.5%) had more than 20 years of teaching experience, 69 (27.4%) had 11 to 15 years, 45 (17.9%) 6 to 10 years, 31 (12.3%) 16 to 20 years, and 25 (9.9%) had less than 5 years of teaching experience. Leadership experience was divided into five different groups: Group 1 (less than one year; n=51, 20.2%), group 2 (2 to 5 years; n=83, 32.9%), group 3 (6 to 10 years; n=52, 20.6%), group 4 (11 to 15 years; n=38, 15.1%), and group 5 (more than 15 years; n=28, 11.1%).

Descriptive Statistics about Autonomy in Decision-making, Empowerment, and School Leadership
The second part of the data analysis consists of descriptive statistics about autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership. Table 2 shows those results. According to it, the mean value for autonomy in decision-making is 3.63. When it comes to its factors, the highest mean was reported in instruction decisions (3.85), and the lowest was in HR decisions (3.54). It is quite understandable as public school leaders usually have a relatively higher level of autonomy in determining instructional and pedagogical strategies. HR, on the other hand, is more centralized where most of the decisions are made at a higher level.

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics about Autonomy in Decision-making, Empowerment, and School Leadership*

Variables	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	95% CI	
					LL	UL
Autonomy in Decision-making	1	5	3.63	0.71	3.54	3.69
Financial Decisions	1	5	3.68	0.84	3.58	3.75
HR Decisions	1	5	3.54	0.75	3.45	3.58
Teacher Training Decisions	1	5	3.60	0.78	3.50	3.66
Professional Development Decisions	1	5	3.77	0.72	3.68	3.83
Instruction Decisions	1	5	3.85	0.81	3.75	3.92
Empowerment	1.7	5	4.04	0.47	3.98	4.11
Status	1	5	4.20	0.54	4.13	4.26
Professional Growth	1.3	5	4.00	0.60	3.93	4.06
Authority	2	5	3.76	0.66	3.68	3.83
Impact	1	5	4.07	0.49	4.01	4.13
Self-efficacy	1	5	4.01	0.54	3.94	4.09
School Leadership	1	4.5	3.67	0.33	3.63	3.67
Laissez-faire	1	4.3	2.28	0.46	2.22	2.28
Transformational	1	5	4.23	0.48	4.17	4.23
Charisma	1	5	4.12	0.59	4.05	4.12
Intellectual stimulation	1	5	4.41	0.55	4.34	4.41
Individual Consideration	1	5	4.17	0.50	4.11	4.17
Transactional	1	5	4.18	0.45	4.12	4.18
Contingent Reward	1	5	4.33	0.54	4.26	4.33
Management by Exception	1	5	4.04	0.49	3.98	4.04
Over-all	1	5	3.93	0.63	3.85	3.93

For empowerment, the school leaders reported a mean score of 4.04. Among its factors, the highest mean was reported for status (4.20). As the school leaders are the highest-ranking official in the school and are followed by everyone else; it is quite natural for them to believe that their status is quite high. However, the reported mean score for authority was only 3.76. It may be due to the fact that public schools are part of a much broader and centralized system in Pakistan. As a result, despite having relatively high status, they may not think that they have the desired level of authority.

When it came to school leadership, the school leaders reported the highest mean score for transformational leadership (4.23) while the lowest was for laissez-faire (2.28). It indicates that the school leaders were quite proactive in their approach, and were keen to make a positive impact. They did not want to just sit back and wait for the things to happen.

Overall the school leaders scored the highest in empowerment, indicating that they felt

quite empowered in their roles and positions. Although the mean values were still high for autonomy in decision-making and leadership; they were lower than empowerment. It suggests that they thought to have higher autonomy in decision-making to make key decisions for their schools.

Relationship between School Leaders' Socio-professional background and Study Variables

The final part of the data analysis includes creational analyses between the school leaders' socio-professional background (gender, age, academic qualification, teaching experience, and leadership experience) and the study variables (autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership).

Relationship between Gender and Study Variables

The first correlational analysis was carried out between gender and the study variables. The findings (Table 3) show that the mean score of male school leaders was slightly higher in autonomy in decision-making, and school leadership; and female school leaders in empowerment. However, t-test analyses reveal that the differences were not statistically significant, suggesting that gender did not play a major role in determining the level of autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership for public school leaders.

Table 3: *Relationship between Gender and Study Variables*

Variables	Male		Female		Independent t-test	
	M	SD	M	SD	t-test	p-value
Autonomy in decision-making	3.66	0.73	3.60	0.68	0.730	0.466
Financial Decisions	3.76	0.83	3.58	0.85	1.756	0.080
HR Decisions	3.59	0.76	3.47	0.73	1.241	0.216
Teacher Training Decisions	3.62	0.81	3.59	0.73	0.305	0.761
Professional Development Decisions	3.78	0.73	3.76	0.71	0.162	0.871
Instruction decisions	3.83	0.82	3.86	0.80	-0.341	0.734
Empowerment	4.03	0.47	4.05	0.47	-0.182	0.855
Status	4.21	0.54	4.20	0.55	0.077	0.939
Professional Growth	3.98	0.63	4.02	0.55	-0.477	0.634
Authority	3.79	0.65	3.73	0.68	0.779	0.437
Impact	4.06	0.47	4.07	0.52	-0.197	0.844
Self-efficacy	4.00	0.54	4.01	0.55	-0.196	0.844
School Leadership	3.68	0.31	3.65	0.35	0.542	0.588
Laissez-faire	2.28	0.46	2.28	0.46	0.003	0.998

Transformational	4.25	0.45	4.21	0.51	0.663	0.508
Charisma	4.13	0.55	4.10	0.63	0.437	0.663
Intellectual Stimulation	4.45	0.52	4.36	0.58	1.254	0.211
Individual Consideration	4.17	0.47	4.17	0.54	0.013	0.990
Transactional	4.17	0.46	4.19	0.45	-0.313	0.754
Contingent Reward	4.31	0.54	4.35	0.54	-0.600	0.549
Management by exception	4.04	0.47	4.03	0.50	0.078	0.938
Over-all	3.93	0.59	3.93	0.68	-0.086	0.931

Relationship between Age Group and Study Variables
Next analyses were carried out based on age. One-way ANOVA was employed for it.

Table 4: *Relationship between Age Group and Study Variables*

Variables	Age Group (years)				ANOVA	
	<30 **M(SD)**	**31-40** **M(SD)**	**41-50** **M(SD)**	**>50** **M(SD)**	**F**	**p**
Autonomy in Decision-making	3.63(0.78)	3.55(0.66)	3.49(0.83)	3.86(0.57)	3.86	.010*
Financial Decisions	3.70(0.90)	3.56(0.79)	3.54(0.97)	3.95(0.71)	4.06	.008*
HR Decisions	3.56(0.81)	3.44(0.70)	3.41(0.85)	3.77(0.62)	3.78	.011*
Teacher Training Decisions	3.58(0.81)	3.55(0.72)	3.44(0.91)	3.82(0.65)	3.16	.025*
Professional Development Decisions	3.77(0.85)	3.69(0.72)	3.68(0.78)	3.96(0.59)	2.51	.059
Instruction Decisions	3.80(0.85)	3.78(0.73)	3.66(1.01)	4.11(0.62)	4.15	.007*
Empowerment	3.95(0.59)	3.97(0.45)	3.98(0.46)	4.19(0.42)	3.98	.009*
Status	4.24(0.83)	4.10(0.46)	4.16(0.55)	4.36(0.48)	3.32	.021*
Professional Growth	3.92(0.65)	3.92(0.61)	3.90(0.60)	4.21(0.51)	4.45	.005*
Authority	3.71(0.61)	3.76(0.62)	3.68(0.69)	3.85(0.71)	0.80	.497
Impact	3.90(0.70)	4.01(0.45)	4.04(0.46)	4.21(0.46)	3.51	.016*
Self-efficacy	3.83(0.74)	3.99(0.49)	3.96(0.56)	4.12(0.49)	2.15	.095

School Leadership	3.61(0.61)	3.66(0.24)	3.66(0.38)	3.70(0.23)	0.56	.639
Laissez-faire	2.18(0.59)	2.33(0.46)	2.31(0.45)	2.21(0.41)	1.44	.232
Transformational	4.12(0.74)	4.18(0.40)	4.23(0.53)	4.33(0.39)	1.81	.145
Charisma	4.00(0.88)	4.05(0.56)	4.10(0.61)	4.25(0.46)	2.05	.108
Intellectual Stimulation	4.28(0.82)	4.35(0.49)	4.43(0.64)	4.49(0.40)	1.44	.231
Individual Consideration	4.07(0.72)	4.15(0.44)	4.15(0.54)	4.24(0.45)	0.88	.451
Transactional	4.24(0.73)	4.17(0.33)	4.11(0.52)	4.23(0.40)	0.93	.427
Contingent Reward	4.47(0.80)	4.27(0.41)	4.25(0.64)	4.41(0.46)	1.96	.121
Management by Exception	4.01(0.71)	4.07(0.37)	3.97(0.57)	4.05(0.44)	0.57	.635
Over-all	3.60(0.78)	3.83(0.57)	3.95(0.64)	4.13(0.57)	5.66	.001*

Table 4 shows that there were statistically significant differences in the mean values of the school leaders in autonomy in decision-making and empowerment. Not only were there significant differences in those variables but also in some of the factors (financial decisions, HR decisions, teacher training decisions, instruction decisions, status, professional growth, and impact). Mean values indicate that as the school leaders grew in age, their mean value also increased in almost all the variables and factors. However, when it came to school leadership, there was no statistically significant difference in the mean scores, suggesting that age did not play a significant role in school leadership.

Relationship between Academic Qualification and Study Variables
Again, one-way ANOVA was carried out. Table 5 shows that there was no statistically significant difference in the mean scores of school leaders with different academic qualification.

Table 5: *Relationship between Academic Qualification and Study Variables*

Variables	Last Academic Degree				ANOVA	
	Graduation	**Master**	**M.Phil.**	**Ph.D.**		
	M(SD)	**M(SD)**	**M(SD)**	**M(SD)**	**F**	**p**

Autonomy in Decision-making	3.60(0.84)	3.68(0.62)	3.54(0.88)	3.04(1.01)	1.280	0.282
Financial Decisions	3.56(0.80)	3.74(0.79)	3.56(1.00)	3.13(0.42)	1.170	0.322
HR decisions	3.48(0.96)	3.58(0.68)	3.46(0.89)	2.97(1.00)	0.953	0.415
Teacher Training Decisions	3.61(0.87)	3.65(0.68)	3.52(0.96)	2.79(1.63)	1.528	0.208
Professional Development Decisions	3.69(0.99)	3.81(0.65)	3.70(0.86)	3.33(1.01)	0.777	0.508
Instruction Decisions	3.91(0.78)	3.90(0.71)	3.69(1.04)	3.20(1.25)	1.725	0.162
Empowerment	3.91(0.36)	4.07(0.45)	3.97(0.53)	4.14(0.59)	0.945	0.419
Status	4.13(0.41)	4.22(0.51)	4.17(0.65)	4.13(0.58)	0.228	0.877
Professional Growth	3.69(0.62)	4.05(0.54)	3.91(0.71)	3.83(0.87)	1.845	0.139
Authority	3.83(0.75)	3.78(0.68)	3.70(0.63)	4.00(0.50)	0.359	0.783
Impact	3.92(0.28)	4.08(0.47)	4.02(0.57)	4.29(0.62)	0.749	0.524
Self-efficacy	4.03(0.08)	4.04(0.54)	3.89(0.58)	4.42(0.38)	1.673	0.173
School Leadership	3.58(0.23)	3.68(0.29)	3.64(0.43)	3.69(0.25)	0.384	0.764
Laissez-faire (LF)	2.48(0.58)	2.28(0.43)	2.25(0.50)	2.10(0.59)	0.818	0.485
Transformational	4.04(0.17)	4.25(0.46)	4.18(0.56)	4.39(0.57)	0.931	0.426
Charisma	4.11(0.13)	4.14(0.57)	4.04(0.66)	4.17(0.80)	0.416	0.742
Intellectual Stimulation	4.11(0.13)	4.43(0.54)	4.39(0.61)	4.50(0.50)	0.988	0.399
Individual Consideration	3.89(0.33)	4.20(0.47)	4.12(0.59)	4.50(0.43)	1.752	0.157
Transactional	3.96(0.20)	4.19(0.43)	4.19(0.53)	4.17(0.60)	0.713	0.545
Contingent Reward	4.07(0.15)	4.34(0.53)	4.33(0.60)	4.33(0.58)	0.676	0.567
Management by Exception	3.85(0.29)	4.04(0.47)	4.04(0.56)	4.00(0.67)	0.452	0.716
Over-all	4.00(0.56)	3.95(0.59)	3.83(0.73)	4.17(0.76)	0.728	0.536

Relationship between Teaching Experience and Study Variables

Teaching experience appeared to have a bigger impact on the study variables as suggested by one-way ANOVA results (table 6). The findings show that there are statistically significant differences in the mean values of the school leaders in autonomy in decision-making and its factors ($p<.001$). In the same way, on the basis of teaching experiences, statistically significant differences in empowerment and three of its factors (status, professional growth, and authority) were found out; however, there were no statistically significant differences for two of its factors: impact and self-efficacy.

Table 6: *Relationship between Teaching Experience and Study Variables*

	Teaching Experience					ANOVA	
	<5	**6-10**	**11-15**	**16-20**	**>20**	**F-ratio**	**p-value**
Autonomy in decision-making	3.53 (0.96)	3.61 (0.54)	3.47 (0.79)	3.60 (0.75)	3.83 (0.56)	6.55	<.001*
Financial Decisions	3.59 (1.08)	3.69 (0.73)	3.47 (0.88)	3.61 (0.93)	3.91 (0.70)	3.52	.008*
HR Decisions	3.47 (0.99)	3.50 (0.57)	3.38 (0.83)	3.51 (0.83)	3.73 (0.61)	3.47	.009*
Teacher Training Decisions	3.48 (0.98)	3.58 (0.60)	3.43 (0.90)	3.59 (0.79)	3.81 (0.64)	3.33	.011*
Professional Development Decisions	3.72 (1.02)	3.67 (0.58)	3.69 (0.80)	3.73 (0.77)	3.93 (0.56)	3.28	.012*
Instruction Decisions	3.63 (1.01)	3.83 (0.67)	3.67 (0.93)	3.77 (0.86)	4.10 (0.61)	2.79	.027*
Empowerment	3.86 (0.67)	3.95 (0.34)	4.00 (0.50)	4.04 (0.43)	4.17 (0.41)	2.75	.029*
Status	4.07 (0.77)	4.08 (0.43)	4.17 (0.59)	4.19 (0.47)	4.35 (0.47)	2.64	.034*
Professional Growth	3.76 (0.83)	3.95 (0.51)	3.91 (0.64)	3.98 (0.53)	4.18 (0.50)	2.61	.036*
Authority	3.68 (0.80)	3.60 (0.59)	3.84 (0.66)	3.76 (0.58)	3.81 (0.68)	2.59	.037*
Impact	3.85 (0.75)	3.96 (0.34)	4.04 (0.50)	4.12 (0.46)	4.19 (0.44)	2.24	.066
Self-efficacy	3.84 (0.77)	3.94 (0.36)	3.98 (0.61)	3.98 (0.56)	4.12 (0.45)	2.16	.074

School Leadership	3.62 (0.62)	3.65 (0.21)	3.62 (0.37)	3.70 (0.19)	3.71 (0.25)	2.11 .080
Laissez-faire	2.33 (0.65)	2.36 (0.47)	2.21 (0.39)	2.34 (0.50)	2.25 (0.41)	1.75 .139
Transformational	4.08 (0.74)	4.18 (0.32)	4.17 (0.57)	4.28 (0.31)	4.34 (0.39)	1.50 .201
Charisma	4.00 (0.83)	3.98 (0.50)	4.06 (0.69)	4.11 (0.50)	4.27 (0.44)	1.18 .318
Intellectual Stimulation	4.26 (0.80)	4.41 (0.39)	4.34 (0.70)	4.48 (0.36)	4.48 (0.42)	1.13 .345
Individual Consideration	3.99 (0.72)	4.14 (0.37)	4.11 (0.58)	4.26 (0.34)	4.27 (0.45)	1.10 .359
Transactional	4.19 (0.73)	4.15 (0.27)	4.17 (0.55)	4.15 (0.31)	4.22 (0.39)	0.93 .444
Contingent Reward	4.35 (0.80)	4.28 (0.36)	4.28 (0.65)	4.32 (0.43)	4.38 (0.46)	0.43 .786
Management by Exception	4.03 (0.71)	4.02 (0.30)	4.06 (0.59)	3.97 (0.37)	4.05 (0.44)	0.23 .923
Over-all	3.66(0.86)	3.67(0.59)	3.91 (0.60)	3.95 (0.55)	4.16 (0.53)	0.22 .928

Relationship between Leadership Experience (Experience as Head) and Study Variables

The final analyses were conducted for leadership experience. The results (Table 7) show a comparison of school leaders with different leadership experiences. It is found that there are no statistically significant differences in autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, school leadership, and most of their factors. There is a statistically significant difference in only intellectual stimulation for school leaders with 2-5 years and 6-10 years of leadership experience.

Table 7: *Relationship between Leadership Experience and Study Variables*

Variables	Experience as Head					ANOVA	
	<1	2-5	6-10	11-15	>15	**F-ratio**	**p-value**
Autonomy in decision-making	3.61 (0.58)	3.63 (0.79)	3.53 (0.77)	3.68 (0.62)	3.82 (0.62)	0.86	0.486
Financial Decisions	3.66 (0.75)	3.68 (0.89)	3.51 (0.93)	3.70 (0.77)	3.99 (0.71)	1.51	0.199
HR Decisions	3.51 (0.64)	3.52 (0.83)	3.44 (0.80)	3.59 (0.66)	3.75 (0.67)	0.87	0.480

Teacher Training Decisions	3.56 (0.61)	3.60 (0.85)	3.52 (0.86)	3.68 (0.73)	3.74 (0.74)	0.49	0.745
Professional Development Decisions	3.78 (0.65)	3.72 (0.81)	3.64 (0.74)	3.90 (0.64)	3.97 (0.61)	1.38	0.243
Instruction Decisions	3.85 (0.69)	3.80 (0.86)	3.73 (0.90)	3.94 (0.79)	4.06 (0.70)	0.97	0.425
Empowerment	4.03 (0.42)	3.98 (0.52)	4.03 (0.52)	4.11 (0.41)	4.15 (0.30)	0.94	0.442
Status	4.16 (0.55)	4.15 (0.60)	4.22 (0.58)	4.31 (0.46)	4.27 (0.37)	0.72	0.577
Professional Growth	4.01 (0.51)	3.94 (0.69)	3.98 (0.61)	4.00 (0.55)	4.17 (0.44)	0.79	0.533
Authority	3.71 (0.74)	3.78 (0.61)	3.77 (0.63)	3.72 (0.70)	3.84 (0.69)	0.24	0.917
Impact	4.05 (0.42)	4.00 (0.55)	4.05 (0.57)	4.17 (0.41)	4.16 (0.32)	1.04	0.390
Self-efficacy	4.05 (0.53)	3.93 (0.60)	3.94 (0.59)	4.16 (0.41)	4.06 (0.40)	1.55	0.188
School Leadership	3.72 (0.20)	3.63 (0.48)	3.70 (0.26)	3.63 (0.17)	3.69 (0.20)	0.88	0.474
Laissez-faire	2.27 (0.44)	2.38 (0.53)	2.22 (0.43)	2.15 (0.38)	2.26 (0.36)	1.86	0.118
Transformational	4.28 (0.38)	4.11 (0.64)	4.33 (0.37)	4.24 (0.31)	4.30 (0.39)	2.17	0.073
Charisma	4.14 (0.53)	4.00 (0.74)	4.17 (0.53)	4.18 (0.34)	4.23 (0.51)	1.38	0.242
Intellectual Stimulation	4.48 (0.56)	4.25 (0.68)	4.55 (0.40)	4.43 (0.40)	4.45 (0.39)	2.84	0.025*
Individual Consideration	4.22 (0.38)	4.09 (0.66)	4.27 (0.39)	4.12 (0.40)	4.23 (0.43)	1.39	0.238
Transactional	4.28 (0.30)	4.12 (0.64)	4.19 (0.38)	4.15 (0.30)	4.21 (0.29)	1.07	0.371
Contingent Reward	4.44 (0.39)	4.22 (0.72)	4.35 (0.44)	4.28 (0.39)	4.44 (0.41)	1.84	0.122
Management by Exception	4.11 (0.35)	4.01 (0.64)	4.03 (0.52)	4.03 (0.27)	3.99 (0.29)	0.42	0.792

Overall	3.95	3.79	4.03	3.97	4.05	1.71	0.148
	(0.55)	(0.69)	(0.62)	(0.64)	(0.55)		

DISCUSSION
This study investigates autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership amongst public school leaders in Pakistan. Moreover, it finds out correlations between those study variables and the school leaders' socio-professional variables (gender, age, academic qualification, teaching experience, and leadership experience).

Literature has repeatedly highlighted the importance of higher autonomy for organizational improvement (Luthans, 1992; Huber et al., 1993). The findings reveal that although autonomy in decision-making is relatively high for school leaders with a mean value of 3.63; it is not very high. Previous studies show that public school leaders usually have a lower level of autonomy (Gawlik, 2008). Thompson et al. (2021) also found that public school leaders crave a higher level of autonomy and empowerment. The level of school autonomy varies from country to country. Usually, schools and their leaders have a higher level of autonomy in countries from the North, whereas those from the South have a more centralized system where schools and their leaders have relatively lesser autonomy (OECD, 2011). Similarly, schools and school leaders in developed countries usually enjoy a higher level of autonomy than those from developing countries (Hanushek et al. 2013). Pakistan, being a developing country from the South, also has a more traditional societal and educational approach. Although, school leaders have some autonomy, it is not very high.

When it comes to factors for autonomy in decision-making, the mean values fluctuate quite a bit. The factor instruction decisions was reported to have the highest mean value, followed by professional development decisions, financial decisions, teachers training decisions, and human resource decisions. It shows that although school leaders have greater autonomy in instruction decisions; when it comes to human resources and teachers' training, they do not consider themselves to be very empowered. This is very important as the quality of education and the school standard are directly linked with teachers' training and human resources (DeMonte, 2013). Still, the school leaders in this study believed that they did not have a great deal of autonomy in decision-making in these areas. It is also worth noting that not only do overall schools' and leaders' autonomy vary from country to country, but also the specific areas and factors. Hanushek et al. (2013) found that while in Shanghai, China, there was a high level of school autonomy in the area of resource allocation, but low in curricula and assessment; the exact opposite was the case in Korea and New Zealand. The current study shows a higher level of autonomy in decision-making in instructions, but relatively lower in financial and human resources.

Empowerment plays a critical role in the professional success of a person as it is positively linked with job satisfaction, performance, motivation, and innovative behavior (Tseo & Ramos, 1995; Abukhait et al., 2019). In the current study, school leaders reported a high level of empowerment with a mean of 4.04. In the factors, the highest mean was reported in status and impact. The school leaders reported having high status and impact in the school. It is quite understandable as the school leaders are the highest-ranked officials in a schools. Maeroff (1988) suggests that teachers' empowerment consists of granting them greater status and increasing their knowledge. The same is found in a study by Flaherty (2018). Although both of those studies talk about teachers' empowerment and status, this study shows that same is true for school leaders. The lowest mean was reported in authority. Previous studies also suggest that public school leaders usually have less authority and control than what they believe they should have (Gawlik, 2008).

School leadership plays a vital role in educational quality and school development (Salfi, 2011; Vaillant, 2015). When it came to school leadership, the mean value was reported to be 3.67. Most of the school leaders reported having adopted the transformational leadership style, which is one of the most widely used leadership styles in the current era. There is a growing recognition that traditional command-and-control leadership styles do not serve well the "organizations embedded in high-velocity environments in which rapid change [necessitates] swift assessment and action" (Kramer & Cook, 2004, p. 2). Also, transformational leadership in schools promotes a positive culture and makes it a learning organization culture (Ghasemzadeh et al., 2020) Anderson (2017) also believes that transformational leadership is the way forward for the educational systems at this time. For transformational leadership factors, the school leaders reported the highest mean in intellectual stimulation (m=4.41), followed by individual consideration (m=4.17) and charisma (m=4.12). It aligns with the previous studies, suggesting that transformational leaders inspire, intellectually stimulate, and individually consider their team members (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

The school leaders also scored high in transactional leadership with a mean value of 4.18. It is in line with the previous literature which suggests that leaders must have a foundation in transactional leadership skills before perfecting the art of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1997). In general, school leaders scored high in both transactional and transformational leadership. Bass and Avolio (1994) believed that transactional and transformational leadership are not dichotomous. They postulated that many of the managerial characteristics of transactional leadership must be present before transformational attributes can emerge. Bass and Avolio (1997) also proposed that effective leaders have the qualities of both transactional and transformational leadership. The findings of this study which show that the school

leaders have scored high in both transactional and transformational domains show that they are effective leaders. Laissez-faire leadership, on the other hand, demonstrates reactive and passive approaches which may result in ineffectiveness. The school leaders in this study scored low in it, further proving themselves to be effective and active leaders. However, as the findings are based on self-reported surveys, they should be read with caution as they tend to magnify strengths and cover up weaknesses (Salters-Pedneault, 2020).

After the descriptive analysis of the study variables, correlation analyses were carried out between the study variables and the school leaders' socio-professional ones. The analyses about gender show that both male and female school leaders have a relatively high level of autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership. Although male school leaders scored slightly higher in autonomy in decision-making and school leadership, and females in empowerment; the differences were not statistically significant. Itzhaky and York (2000) also came to similar conclusions. Kent et al (2010) found that there were no major differences in the leadership styles between male and female leaders. Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) concluded in their meta-analysis study that when all leadership contexts are considered, men and women do not differ in their leadership and its effectiveness.

When it came to the age of the participants, there were statistically significant differences in autonomy in decision-making and empowerment as the older school leaders felt more autonomous in decision-making and empowered. Many studies also found that young and new teachers felt less empowered than their senior counterparts (Shen, 1997; Jejeebhoy, 2000). Even in the Pakistani context, the same pattern was observed (Batool & Jadoon, 2018). Although the findings are not unexpected given the tenure and power structure in the public schools in Pakistan, the disparity between junior and senior teachers in their perceptions of empowerment does raise some issues in school governance. Literature suggests that young teachers and school leaders should be empowered so that they may perform more effectively (Shen, 1997; Whitener, 1997). However, when it came to school leadership, age did not make a significant difference.

There have been very few studies investigating the relationship between school leaders' academic qualifications with autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership. Malik and Courtney (2011) found a positive correlation between increased education and empowerment. This study, however, finds no significant differences based on academic qualifications.

Finally, the study variables were analyzed based on teaching and leadership experience. Although the researchers could not find any prior studies investigating the

relationship between the teaching experience of the principals with their autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, or school leadership; the current study found that teaching experience is positively correlated with autonomy in decision-making and empowerment. Leadership experience, on the other hand, did not appear to have any significant relationship with any of the study variables. Only intellectual simulation (a factor of transformational leadership) showed a significantly positive correlation with the leadership experience. This finding raises an eyebrow and needs further and deeper investigation as leadership experience is expected to improve school leaders' autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership. Also, the fact that age is positively related to autonomy in decision-making and empowerment; but leadership experience is not; invites a need for deeper investigation.

This study concluded that the public school leaders in Pakistan are relatively autonomous in decision-making, empowered and have high level of school leadership; however, in a few factors (HR decisions, teacher training decisions, authority, and financial decisions), they scored low. It also concludes that school leaders enjoy high status and prestige in society. They are more inclined towards transformational and transactional leadership which are some of the more proactive and effective leadership styles; and swayed away from laissez-faire which is more reactive and passive in nature. There was no significant difference based on gender which is a good indicator. It shows that the school leaders in Pakistan do not feel gender-based discrimination which is a very significant and positive finding. School leaders belonging to both genders reported themselves to be equally autonomous, felt empowered, and that they are effective leaders and adopted transformational and transactional leadership as a way to lead their respective organizations.

Academic qualification also did not have a statistically significant relationship with any of the study variables. It may indicate that autonomy in decision-making, empowerment, and school leadership are more influenced by age than degrees. Age turned out to be the most influential of the socio-professional variables as it showed a statistically significant positive relationship with autonomy in decision-making and empowerment. It is natural as a school leader generally becomes more mature, self-assured, and empowered with the age. Teaching experience also had a statistically significant relationship with autonomy in decision-making and empowerment; however, leadership experience did not have a statistically significant relationship with any of the study variables which is a surprising revelation. Further studies need to be carried out to probe it deeper.

RECOMMENDATIONS
School leaders should have a bigger say in teacher training decisions. Effective teacher training is always contextual as the needs and the ground realities may vary from

school to school. If School leaders are given more autonomy in decision-making, the results may be better.

Similarly, their opinion should be given more value and importance in HR decisions. Education is a service-based sector and as school leaders, they should be part of HR decision-making process. In Pakistan, the process in the public schools is more centralized with school leaders acting more like managers and expected to utilize the given human resources.

Involving them more in financial decisions is likely to further improve the education and school system in Pakistan as they understand the needs on the ground and can help direct the financial resources to those specific areas.

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