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When Ethics Meets Ownership: Rethinking the Mediating Path to Teachers' Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative survey study investigated the role of school principals' ethical leadership in promoting knowledge sharing among teachers from various fields, including language education teachers in the national education system, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of psychological ownership. The statistical population consisted of all physical education teachers in Golestan Province (N = 686), from whom 247 participants were selected through random cluster sampling. Data were collected using the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire (Brown et al., 2005), the Psychological Ownership Questionnaire (Avey et al., 2008), and the Knowledge Sharing Questionnaire (Park & Lee, 2013). The validity of the instruments was confirmed by five experts in the field management, and their reliability was established through a pilot study. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with SPSS and PLS-SEM (SmartPLS 3). The results indicated that principals' ethical leadership had a positive and significant direct effect on both psychological ownership and knowledge sharing among teachers from various fields, including language education teachers. Further analysis also confirmed that psychological ownership significantly mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and knowledge sharing. These findings suggest that ethical leadership can strengthen teachers' sense of ownership toward their work and encourage collaborative knowledge-sharing behaviors, thereby creating a supportive and interactive school environment that contributes to improving educational practices and student outcomes. Future studies may examine whether ethical leadership similarly promotes collaborative professional discourse and knowledge sharing among language teachers and other educational professionals.

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1. Introduction

Research conducted on efficient and successful educational systems indicates that ethically oriented educational managers play a crucial role in shaping effective educational cultures by influencing teaching processes and enhancing teachers' motivational dynamics (Yousefi et al., 2023). School principals have always held a central position within the education system, and the impact of ethical and interactive leadership on improving organizational productivity in education has been widely emphasized. Accordingly, the professional development of school principals is considered a fundamental component of school improvement and educational effectiveness (Sawada et al., 2022). Creating a desirable learning environment, fostering constructive interaction with educational staff, and facilitating teachers' professional growth through knowledge empowerment and effective feedback are among the defining characteristics of successful educational systems. In this regard, policymakers and educational planners increasingly emphasize the importance of appointing ethical educational leaders and developing school cultures grounded in students' needs and institutional values. Such an approach enables principals to clarify educational goals, strengthen collaboration among teachers, and improve students' academic progress (Antoniou et al., 2018). With the transition toward knowledge-based economies, the value of organizations increasingly depends on their intellectual and human capital rather than solely on financial resources. Skilled and knowledgeable human resources are now considered the most valuable assets of modern organizations. Developing such resources requires creating environments that encourage employees to use their knowledge, skills, and experiences to support organizational goals and value creation (Lande et al., 2023). Within educational systems, knowledge sharing among teachers is recognized as a key factor in improving teaching quality and organizational learning. Educational development, therefore, depends not only on structural improvements but also on empowering teachers through supportive leadership and collaborative organizational climates. Ethical leadership can play a vital role in this process by promoting trust, fairness, and constructive interactions that enhance teachers' willingness to share knowledge and experiences. In this regard, psychological ownership has been recognized as an important psychological state that influences employees' attitudes and behaviors in organizations. Psychological ownership reflects individuals' feelings of possession and responsibility toward their work and organization, which can increase commitment, motivation, and proactive behaviors such as knowledge sharing (Hallinger et al., 2018; Mackey et al., 2016). When teachers experience a strong sense of psychological ownership, they tend to feel more responsible for organizational outcomes and become more willing to contribute their knowledge and expertise to collective goals.

Despite extensive research on ethical leadership and its positive organizational outcomes, prior studies have predominantly focused on direct effects, with limited attention to the underlying

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psychological mechanisms that explain how ethical leadership influences teachers' knowledge-sharing behaviors in educational settings. In particular, the mediating role of psychological ownership in linking principals' ethical leadership to teachers' knowledge sharing remains underexplored, especially within school contexts. Moreover, empirical evidence from the Iranian educational system, particularly among physical education teachers, is scarce, highlighting a significant contextual and theoretical gap that warrants systematic investigation. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the role of school principals' ethical leadership in promoting teachers' knowledge sharing, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of psychological ownership among physical education teachers in Golestan Province. By addressing this gap, the study seeks to contribute to the literature on educational leadership and provide practical insights for improving collaborative and knowledge-based practices in schools. Although the present study focuses on teachers generally, the findings may also inform language education contexts where collaborative knowledge sharing and professional discourse constitute essential dimensions of teacher development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ethical Leadership in Educational Organizations

In recent years, leadership style has been recognized as one of the most influential factors affecting teachers' professional behaviors. Rajabi et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of leadership styles in educational organizations and argued that transformational and participative leadership can strengthen organizational identity and encourage teachers to engage in constructive and collaborative behaviors such as knowledge sharing (Rajabi et al., 2023). Similarly, Huang et al. (2024) reported that ethical leadership practices enhance knowledge sharing within educational environments by strengthening trust and positive relationships between managers and employees (Le & Hoang, 2025).

Su et al. (2021) emphasized that although knowledge sharing is essential for organizational success, it contributes to improved performance and team cohesion only when leaders promote internal cohesion and social exchange through ethical and supportive leadership behaviors (Su et al., 2021). Ethical leaders, through rational decision-making and respectful communication, strengthen interpersonal relationships within organizations (Khalili et al., 2021) and encourage employees to contribute actively to collective goals. Such leadership can also reduce negative behaviors such as knowledge hiding while promoting cooperative attitudes among employees (Khan et al., 2022; Men et al., 2020).

Empirical studies further demonstrate that ethical and participative leadership styles enhance teachers' organizational commitment and facilitate knowledge sharing by fostering a culture of trust and

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fairness in schools (Le et al., 2023; Phetsombat & Na-Nan, 2023). When teachers perceive fairness, respect, and support from school principals, they are more likely to engage in collaborative activities and exchange professional knowledge with colleagues. Therefore, the organizational climate created by school principals plays a significant role in shaping teachers' attitudes, motivation, and professional behaviors.

Research also suggests that observing ethical behavior in school leaders encourages teachers to internalize similar values and reproduce them in their professional interactions. Şenol et al. (2018) found that principals' personality traits and leadership behaviors can strengthen teachers' professional motivation and competencies while fostering a sense of belonging and ownership toward their work, which are essential elements for sustainable educational development (Şenol et al., 2018).

2.2. Psychological Ownership and Knowledge Sharing

Educational systems rely heavily on motivated, creative, and committed human resources. The effectiveness and sustainability of schools depend largely on teachers' knowledge and competencies. When teachers feel supported by ethical leaders and experience a sense of ownership toward their work environment, they are more likely to engage in collaborative learning, innovation, and professional knowledge exchange (Rodgrenjad et al., 2023).

Evidence from successful educational systems suggests that ethical leadership can create supportive and safe working environments that encourage teachers to update and share knowledge while fostering creativity and innovation (Liu & Ge, 2020; Liu et al., 2023). Psychological ownership strengthens employees' emotional attachment to their organization and increases their sense of responsibility toward organizational outcomes, which in turn encourages proactive behaviors such as cooperation and knowledge sharing among colleagues. Knowledge sharing has also been recognized as an important component of teacher professional learning communities in language education, where collaborative reflection and pedagogical dialogue contribute to instructional development. This broader perspective extends the relevance of ethical leadership beyond organizational management.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

This study was applied in terms of its objective and descriptive survey in terms of its method of implementation. The statistical population consisted of all teachers from various fields, including language education teachers in Golestan Province in 2023. According to information obtained from the

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Physical Education Department of the General Directorate of Education of the province, the total number of teachers was 686 (371 male and 315 female). Based on Cochran's formula, a sample of 247 teachers from various fields, including language education teachers, was selected through cluster random sampling. Because the number of teachers from various fields, including language education teachers in elementary and secondary schools, was not equal, cluster random sampling was used to ensure appropriate representation.

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study were 247 teachers from various fields, including language education teachers selected from a total population of 686 teachers in Golestan Province. The population included 371 male and 315 female teachers working in elementary and secondary schools. Participants were selected using cluster random sampling to ensure representation across different school levels. All selected teachers voluntarily participated in the study.

3.3. Instruments

Data were collected using three standardized questionnaires measuring ethical leadership, psychological ownership, and knowledge sharing. Ethical leadership was assessed using the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire developed by Brown et al. (2005). This instrument consists of 10 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Brown et al. (2005) reported an internal reliability coefficient of 0.94 for this questionnaire. In subsequent studies, reliability coefficients of 0.92 and 0.93 were reported by Huang and Peterson (2017) and Ali et al. (2021), respectively (Zahed et al., 2019; Huang & Paterson, 2017). Psychological ownership was measured using the 12-item questionnaire developed by Avey et al. (2009). The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The estimated reliability of this instrument was reported as 0.90. Hey et al. (2022) also reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89 for this scale (Hey et al., 2022).

Knowledge sharing was assessed using the instrument developed by Park and Lee (2013), which consists of 6 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Park and Lee (2013) reported a reliability coefficient of 0.91 for this questionnaire. In addition, Gulfraz (2020) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 for this instrument (Gulfraz, 2020). The face and content validity of the questionnaires were evaluated by five PhD holders in sports management. Based on their suggestions, minor revisions were made to the wording of several items. In addition, the reliability of the instruments was assessed through a pilot study. For this purpose, 40 teachers from various fields, including language education teachers, were selected using convenience sampling and completed the

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questionnaires. Cronbach's alpha coefficients obtained from the pilot study were 0.79 for ethical leadership, 0.82 for psychological ownership, and 0.81 for knowledge sharing, indicating acceptable reliability for the instruments used in this study.

3.4. Procedure

After obtaining the necessary permissions from the relevant educational authorities, the researchers contacted teachers from various fields, including language education teachers in selected schools and explained the purpose of the study. The questionnaires were then distributed among the selected participants. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used only for research purposes. After completing the questionnaires, the researchers collected them and prepared the data for statistical analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, mean, and standard deviation, were used to summarize the participants' responses. For inferential analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the relationships among ethical leadership, psychological ownership, and knowledge sharing. The analyses were performed using SPSS version 25 and Smart PLS version 3 software. In addition, the mediating role of psychological ownership was tested using the Sobel test.

4. Results

The descriptive results showed that the highest frequency regarding the teaching experience of the respondents belonged to the 11–20 years group (104 teachers). Furthermore, the results indicated that the majority of the research sample held a master's degree (129 teachers). Finally, the results showed that the highest percentage of respondents' ages fell within the 31–40 years range (109 teachers) (Table 1).

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Table 1

Description of the Individual Characteristics of the Subjects by Work Experience, Education and Age

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Teaching Experience	1–10 years	70	28.3
	11–20 years	104	42.1
	21 years and above	73	29.6
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree	106	42.9
	Master's Degree	129	52.2
	Doctorate (PhD)	12	4.9
Age	20–30 years	39	15.8

Table 2 presents the descriptive analysis of the research variables. As shown in this Table, the mean and standard deviation of the three variables-ethical leadership, psychological ownership, and knowledge sharing-are 3.49 ± 0.84, 3.48 ± 0.86, and 3.42 ± 0.84, respectively.

Table 2

Description of Research Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ethical Leadership	247	3.49	0.84
Psychological Ownership	247	3.48	0.86
Knowledge Sharing	247	3.42	0.84

In structural equation modeling using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach, the measurement model must first be evaluated, and then the research hypotheses are tested through assessment of the structural model. As shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, all factor loadings of the items related to the research variables are above 0.5, and all paths are statistically significant.

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Table 3

The Results of Factor Loading and Significance of the Research Measurement Model Questions

Variable	Item	Factor Loading	t-value	Variable	Item	Factor Loading	t-value
Ethical Leadership	EL1	0.912	46.442	Psychological Ownership	PO7	0.862	21.112
	EL2	0.944	57.715		PO8	0.812	19.311
	EL3	0.902	36.066		PO9	0.789	14.881
	EL4	0.849	24.780		PO10	0.922	45.354
	EL5	0.875	28.660		PO11	0.845	21.622
	EL6	0.937	52.994		PO12	0.865	27.713
	EL7	0.879	26.789	Knowledge Sharing	KS1	0.925	68.004
	EL8	0.806	20.707		KS2	0.790	28.438
	EL9	0.792	17.170		KS3	0.788	29.109
	EL10	0.704	11.600		KS4	0.860	26.126
Psychological Ownership	PO1	0.868	27.245		KS5	0.828	18.651
	PO2	0.777	15.303		KS6	0.808	22.942
	PO3	0.846	21.087				
	PO4	0.974	222.528				
	PO5	0.856	21.168				
	PO6	0.907	37.253				

The fit of the measurement model was evaluated by examining three criteria: reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. To assess the reliability of the measurement model, composite reliability, rho-A, Cronbach's alpha, and factor loadings were used. Since the values of composite reliability, rho-A, and Cronbach's alpha were all greater than 0.7, and the factor loadings of the items were greater than 0.5 (Table 4 and Figure 1), the reliability of the measurement models is confirmed. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) index was used to assess construct validity. Researchers have suggested that values of 0.5 or higher indicate an acceptable level for this index (Rajabi et al., 2023). Considering the AVE values for the research variables shown in Table 4, it can be concluded that the variables possess adequate construct validity.

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Table 4

Reliability and Validity Indicators of the Measurement Model

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	rho-A	Composite Reliability	AVE (Mean Variance Extracted)
Ethical Leadership	0.961	0.963	0.967	0.745
Psychological Ownership	0.968	0.971	0.972	0.743
Knowledge Sharing	0.913	0.926	0.932	0.696

In addition, examining the validity of the structural model is necessary to ensure the adequacy of the quality of the proposed model. For a construct to have acceptable discriminant validity, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for that construct must be greater than its correlations with other constructs. Based on the results presented in Table 5, it can be stated that the constructs examined in this study have good discriminant validity.

Table 5

Validity of Research Variables Based on the HTMT Index

3	2	1	Constructs	No.
		—	Ethical Leadership	1
	—	0.664	Psychological Ownership	2
—	0.751	0.872	Knowledge Sharing	3

To evaluate the structural model, the criteria of collinearity among predictor variables, significance of t values, and the R^2 criterion were used, and PLS-Predict was applied to assess the model's predictive power. In assessing collinearity, if the VIF value is less than 5, it indicates acceptable collinearity, and if it is less than 3, it can be stated with greater confidence that no collinearity exists. In this study, the VIF values for the two predictor variables-ethical leadership and psychological ownership-were calculated as 3.174 and 2.891, respectively, indicating that collinearity is present. To examine the significance of the path coefficients, the bootstrapping method was used. The number of bootstrap samples should be greater than the number of valid observations in the original dataset. Based on the study by Rajabi et al. (2023), 10,000 bootstrap samples were used (34). Several criteria are used to assess the fit of the structural model, the first and most fundamental of which is the significance of the coefficients (T-values). T values greater than 2.576 (α=0.01), 1.960 (α=0.05), and 1.645 (α=0.10) (for

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two-tailed and one-tailed tests, respectively) indicate significant path coefficients. The R^2 value is also an important index for evaluating the structural model. Chin (1998) argues that R^2 is the most important indicator for testing a causal model because it shows the extent to which the dependent variable can be predicted by the independent variables, and it is compared against three values: 0.19 (weak), 0.33 (moderate), and 0.67 (strong) (34). In this study, the R^2 value for the knowledge sharing variable in the research model was estimated as 0.871, indicating that ethical leadership and psychological ownership together predict 87.1% of the variance in knowledge sharing, which represents a strong level of prediction. When evaluating the predictive power of a model, many researchers consider the coefficient of determination as an indicator of predictive power. However, this interpretation is not entirely accurate because the coefficient of determination only reflects the model's explanatory power within the sample. Therefore, the Q^2 index was used. In PLS, Q^2 is important and must be greater than zero. When an endogenous variable takes values of 0.02**,** 0.15, and 0.35, it indicates weak, moderate, and strong predictive power, respectively. To evaluate this index, the sum of squared observations for each latent variable block (SSO) and the sum of squared prediction errors for each latent variable block (SSE) were considered. Based on the results presented in Table 6, it can be stated that the variables in this study have acceptable cross-validated communality.

Table 6

Cross-Validated Communality of Research Constructs

Variable	SSO	SSE	1 − SSE/SSO	Predictive Power
Ethical Leadership	2470	873.208	0.646	Strong
Psychological Ownership	2964	1024.488	0.654	Strong
Knowledge Sharing	1482	666.736	0.550	Strong

After ensuring the validity and reliability of the research model, hypothesis testing was conducted, and the results are reported in Table 7. The research findings demonstrated that ethical leadership has a positive and significant effect on the psychological ownership of physical education teachers (beta = 0.931, t = 49.286). Furthermore, the results indicated that the effect of ethical leadership on the knowledge sharing of physical education teachers is positive and significant (beta = 0.609, t = 9.515). Finally, the findings of the Sobel test revealed that the effect of ethical leadership on the knowledge sharing of physical education teachers, with the mediating role of psychological ownership, is positive and significant (beta = 0.269, t = 5.266).

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Table 7

Direct and Indirect Effects of Research Variables

Model Effects	Path (β)	t-value	Significance Level (p-value)
Ethical Leadership → Psychological Ownership	0.931	49.286	0.001
Ethical Leadership → Knowledge Sharing	0.609	9.515	0.001
Ethical Leadership → Knowledge Sharing (mediated by Psychological Ownership)	0.269	5.266	0.001

In Figure 1, the factor loadings of the research variable indicators (items) are observable. Since all factor loadings are above the threshold level of 0.5, the reliability of the measurement model is confirmed.

Figure 1

The Tested Model in the Standard Estimation Mode

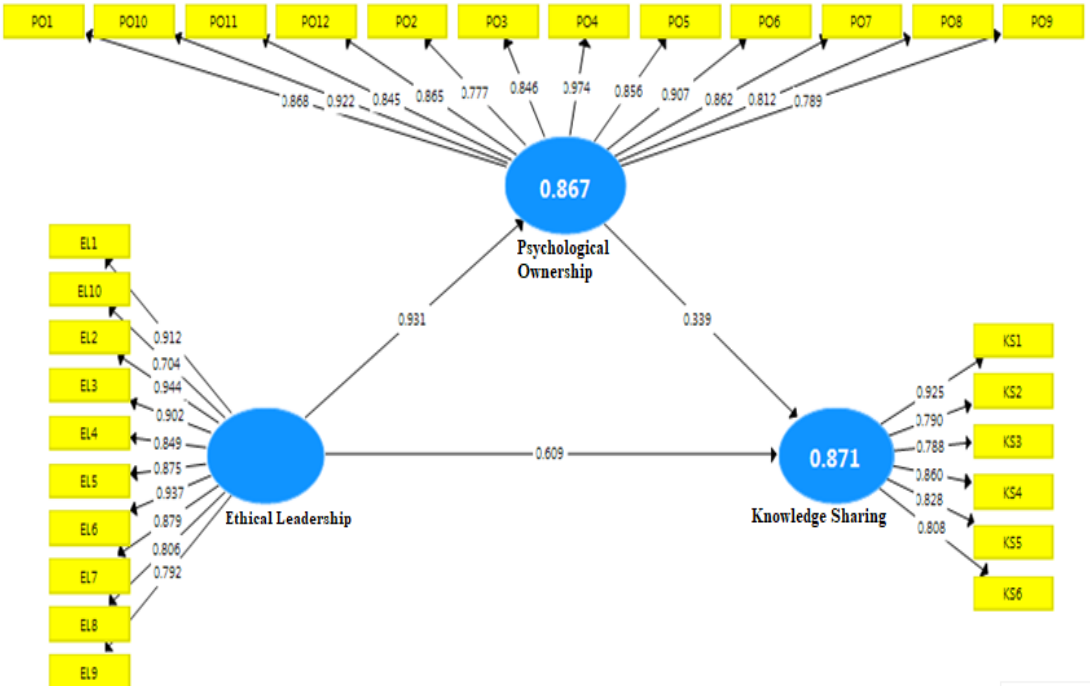

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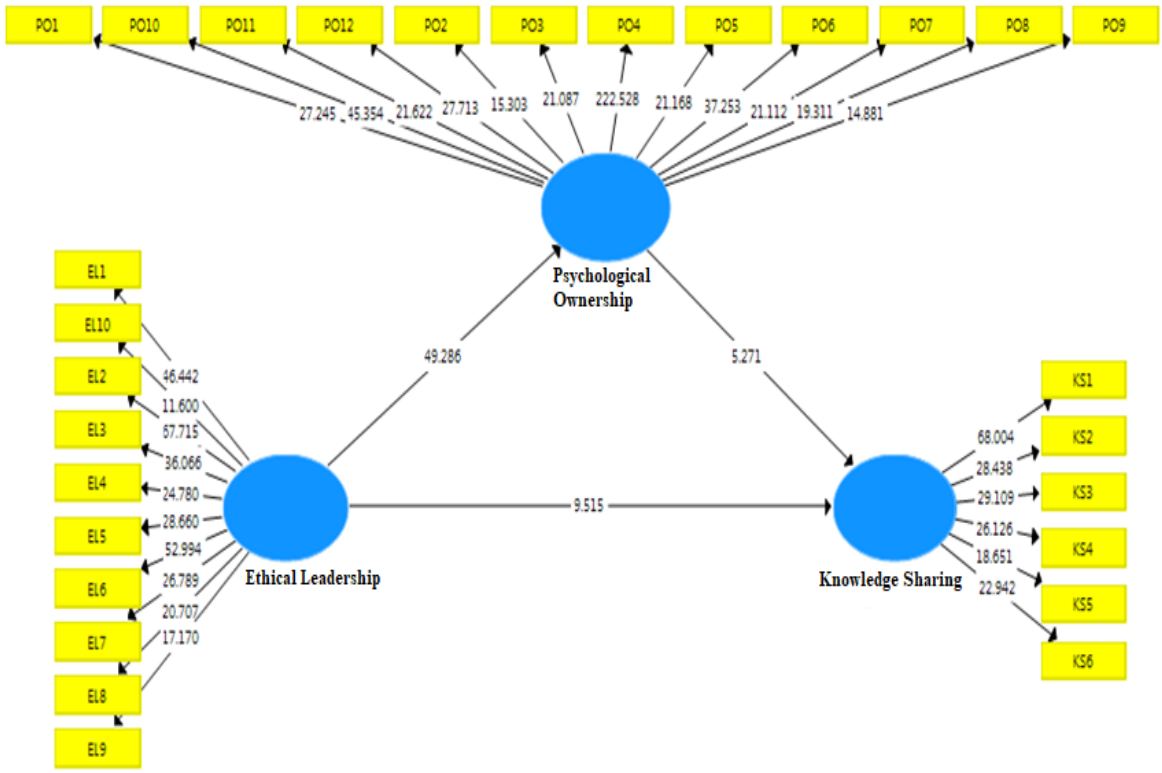
Figure 2

The Tested Model in the Significant



5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the important role of ethical leadership in promoting knowledge sharing among physical education teachers. The results showed that the ethical leadership of school principals has a direct and significant effect on teachers' knowledge sharing. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted by Huang et al. (2024), Khedmati et al. (2023), Yousefi et al. (2023), Moghaddas et al. (2023), Rajabi et al. (2023), Salmani et al. (2022), Kılıçoğlu and Kılıçoğlu (2019), Khalili et al. (2021), Bavik et al. (2017), Liu et al. (2023), Saeed et al. (2022), Agarwal et al. (2022), Su et al. (2021), and Men et al. (2020). These studies confirm that when employees perceive high ethical standards in their leaders, they are more willing to cooperate and contribute to organizational goals through voluntary behaviors such as sharing knowledge and experience. In educational systems, ethical leadership plays a fundamental role in shaping collaborative environments. As Yousefi et al. (2023) noted, the realization of educational values largely depends on the ability of senior policymakers to appoint ethical and competent educational managers. Ethical managers, through supportive behaviors, fairness in decision-making, and constructive interactions with teachers, create an environment of trust

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that encourages teachers to share professional knowledge and participate in collective learning processes (Yousefi et al., 2023). Similarly, Khalili et al. (2021) emphasized that ethical management practices represent justice-oriented approaches in educational organizations, which strengthen teachers' sense of belonging and commitment to organizational goals (Khalili et al., 2021).

Another explanation for this finding relates to the creation of supportive and motivating environments by ethical leaders. According to Moghaddas et al. (2023), behaviors such as distributive and procedural justice, knowledge sharing by managers themselves, and the empowerment of teachers through participatory spaces are among the defining characteristics of positive educational leadership. These behaviors encourage teachers to actively participate in professional development and knowledge exchange activities (Moghaddas et al., 2023). Bavik et al. (2017) argued that when teachers observe supportive behaviors from school principals regarding knowledge exchange, they become more willing to engage in similar behaviors themselves. In this sense, ethical leadership not only promotes trust and fairness but also acts as a behavioral model that encourages collaborative professional practices among teachers.

The findings of the present study also confirmed the mediating role of psychological ownership in the relationship between ethical leadership and knowledge sharing. This result is consistent with the findings of Kılıçoğlu and Kılıçoğlu (2019), Khan et al. (2022), and Liu et al. (2023). Psychological ownership reflects employees' feelings of belonging and responsibility toward their organization and work. When teachers experience a strong sense of ownership toward their educational environment, they are more likely to engage in proactive behaviors such as cooperation, innovation, and knowledge sharing. According to Liu et al. (2023), if the basic psychological needs of employees are not adequately addressed by organizational leaders, employees are less likely to demonstrate commitment, knowledge acquisition, or the transfer of valuable experiences within the organization. In contrast, supportive psychological conditions can motivate employees to maintain high levels of engagement and performance. Similar findings were reported by Kılıçoğlu and Kılıçoğlu (2019), who also observed that the mediating effect of psychological ownership was smaller than the direct influence of leadership variables on knowledge sharing among teachers. Nevertheless, psychological ownership still plays a meaningful role in facilitating knowledge sharing within educational organizations. Organizational behavior researchers argue that environments characterized by trust, fairness, and psychological safety encourage employees to voluntarily share knowledge and collaborate with colleagues. In such contexts, employees perceive themselves as integral parts of the organization and actively contribute to its development through learning and knowledge exchange. These findings may also have implications for collaborative teacher learning communities, including language education, where ethical leadership can facilitate professional dialogue and knowledge exchange.

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6. Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between ethical leadership of school principals and knowledge sharing among teachers from various fields, including language education teachers, with psychological ownership as a mediating variable. The results showed that ethical leadership significantly enhances teachers' willingness to share knowledge, both directly and indirectly, through strengthening psychological ownership. These findings emphasize the importance of ethical management practices in educational organizations. School principals who demonstrate fairness, honesty, and supportive behaviors can create an environment of trust and collaboration that encourages teachers to exchange knowledge and experiences. Such environments contribute to the development of learning-oriented schools and improve the overall effectiveness of educational systems. Future research may replicate this model in language education and other disciplinary contexts to examine whether the observed relationships remain stable across different teaching environments.

Based on these findings, educational policymakers and administrators are encouraged to prioritize the selection and training of school leaders with strong ethical competencies. Providing professional development programs for school principals, promoting participatory leadership practices, and strengthening organizational cultures based on trust and collaboration can significantly enhance knowledge sharing among teachers. In addition, improving teachers' psychological ownership requires creating supportive work environments where teachers feel valued, respected, and involved in organizational decision-making. Encouraging collaborative learning, recognizing teachers' professional contributions, and providing opportunities for continuous professional development can further strengthen teachers' commitment to knowledge sharing. Ultimately, promoting ethical leadership and psychological ownership within schools can foster more collaborative and knowledge-oriented educational environments, which are essential for improving teaching quality and achieving sustainable educational development.

Future Research

Although this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between ethical leadership, psychological ownership, and knowledge sharing among physical education teachers, further research is needed to build upon these findings. Current suggestions for future studies are often generic; therefore, we propose the following specific avenues for future investigation:

- Future studies may examine language teachers and teachers from other disciplines for comparative analysis.

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- Longitudinal designs should be adopted to establish stronger causal relationships between ethical leadership and knowledge sharing.
- Qualitative or mixed-methods approaches could be employed to gain a deeper understanding of how ethical leadership shapes knowledge-sharing practices.
- Additional mediators, such as teacher identity, trust, organizational commitment, or professional learning communities, could be investigated to further elucidate the underlying mechanisms.
- Comparative studies across different educational systems and cultural contexts would enhance the generalizability of the findings.

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Disclosure Statement

Each author contributed meaningfully to the research process.

Declaration

This manuscript represents original work and is not currently submitted to, or under review by, any other journal.

Transparency Statements

The authors affirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Any additional data can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Declaration of Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Consideration

This manuscript adheres to the ethical guidelines provided by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) for ensuring integrity and transparency in the research publication process.

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