



Authentic Leadership and School Effectiveness: The Mediating Role of Affective Commitment

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A B S T R A C T

This study examined the mediating role of affective commitment in the relationship between authentic leadership and organisational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Western Province, Zambia. Despite growing interest in authentic leadership, no prior study has tested affective commitment as a simultaneous mediator linking it to both organisational effectiveness and job satisfaction in a Zambian school-level model, a gap this study addresses. Grounded in Authentic Leadership Theory and Social Exchange Theory, a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 402 teachers across five districts using the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire, the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ), and the Survey of Organisational Effectiveness. Structural Equation Modelling with bootstrapped mediation analysis was supplemented by thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 20 Headteachers. The SEM demonstrated excellent model fit and found that authentic leadership exerted a strong direct effect on organisational effectiveness ($\beta = 0.433$, $p < 0.001$) and an exceptionally strong effect on affective commitment ($\beta = 0.963$, $p < 0.001$). Affective commitment partially mediated the leadership effectiveness relationship, accounting for 46% of the total effect (indirect $\beta = 0.364$). Contrary to expectations, job satisfaction had no significant direct effect on organisational effectiveness ($\beta = 0.009$, $p = 0.825$). The study proposes what may be termed a 'heart-first' pattern of school effectiveness, in which affective commitment, rather than job satisfaction, appears to be the primary psychological mechanism through which authentic leadership is associated with school performance and advances culturally contextualized implications for principal leadership development, suggesting that leadership preparation, teacher retention, and school improvement policy in comparable Sub-Saharan African educational contexts should prioritise the cultivation of affective commitment rather than job satisfaction alone.

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1. Introduction

The imperative to identify leadership behaviours that reliably improve school performance occupies a central position in contemporary educational administration research (Northouse, 2022; Yukl, 2010). While transformational and instructional leadership models have dominated the literature for decades (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Robinson et al., 2008), a growing body of scholarship identifies authentic leadership characterised by self-awareness, relational transparency, internalised moral perspective, and balanced processing (Walumbwa et al., 2008) as a root construct underpinning other positive leadership forms (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

In Sub-Saharan African public schools, where chronic resource scarcity, political interference, and high teacher attrition rates undermine institutional trust, authentic leadership is particularly consequential for sustaining organisational effectiveness (Ministry of Education, 2022; Msila & Setlhako, 2023).

Despite the proliferation of authentic leadership research globally, its application in Sub-Saharan African secondary schools remains largely unexamined. Gardner et al. (2024), in a systematic review of 303 authentic leadership studies published between 2010 and 2023, identified significant geographical and methodological gaps in the literature. Dedzo et al. (2026) further demonstrated that authentic leadership in West African contexts encompasses additional dimensions, notably collective orientation, not captured by the dominant four-factor model (Walumbwa et al., 2008), reinforcing the need for contextually embedded investigation. Critically, these reviews suggest that comprehensive mediation models of this kind have rarely been tested in African school systems, pointing to a theoretical and empirical gap that the present study seeks to help address.

This study addresses three specific and interconnected gaps. First, it tests a simultaneous mediation model in which affective commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991, 1997) operates as the mechanism linking authentic leadership to both job satisfaction and organisational effectiveness. Second, it situates authentic leadership within the culturally specific context of Western Province, Zambia. Third, it contests the prevailing assumption that job satisfaction independently drives organisational effectiveness (Locke, 1976; Herzberg et al., 1959), and examines whether affective commitment may account for much of this role when authentic leadership is present in the model. The study's primary contribution lies in proposing and empirically examining a 'heart-first' model of school effectiveness that foregrounds affective commitment as the dominant mediating mechanism. The explicit objective of this study is therefore to test whether affective commitment mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and organisational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Western Province, Zambia, using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design.

1.1 Research Objectives and Hypotheses

Drawing on Authentic Leadership Theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008) and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), three primary hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Authentic leadership has a significant positive direct effect on organisational effectiveness.

H2: Job satisfaction has a significant positive direct effect on organisational effectiveness.

H3: Affective commitment significantly mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and organisational effectiveness.

These hypotheses are situated within a single mediation model in which authentic leadership is theorised to influence organisational effectiveness through two parallel follower pathways. Although the study's primary objective concerns the mediating role of affective commitment (H3), job satisfaction is retained as a competing motivational pathway (H2) so that the relative explanatory power of the two mechanisms can be compared directly within the same model. H2 is therefore not a stand-alone proposition but a comparative test of whether job satisfaction functions as an independent driver of effectiveness once authentic leadership and affective commitment are accounted for.

1.2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

1.2.1 Authentic Leadership Theory

Building on the four-dimensional conceptualisation introduced above (Walumbwa et al., 2008), authentic leadership has been operationalised in the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ), which has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across

multiple cultural and organisational contexts (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011; Dirik et al., 2024). Authentic leadership theory posits that leaders who embody these dimensions create conditions for positive follower development, enhanced trust, and improved organisational outcomes (Gardner et al., 2005; Ilies et al., 2005).

Critiques of authentic leadership theory have focused on construct distinctiveness (Gardner et al., 2024), measurement validity (Butterworth et al., 2024), and cultural universality (Dedzo et al., 2026). Of particular relevance, Dedzo et al. (2026), in a qualitative investigation of 16 Ghanaian executives, identified collective orientation as an additional dimension of authentic leadership in West African contexts, arguing that authentic leadership in collectivist societies encompasses responsiveness to community values and welfare beyond individual self-disclosure. Taken together, these critiques suggest that authentic leadership theory requires culturally adaptive extension to remain theoretically robust in non-Western contexts, an imperative this study directly engages.

1.2.2 Social Exchange Theory and the Reciprocity Mechanism

Social Exchange Theory (SET), developed by Homans (1961) and Blau (1964) and elaborated by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), provides the explanatory mechanism through which authentic leadership influences follower outcomes. The norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) posits that individuals feel obligated to reciprocate the benefits they receive from others. In teacher-principal relationships, authentic leadership provides relational benefits such as trust, transparency, ethical treatment, and fair decision-making that foster feelings of obligation and appreciation among teachers. According to SET, teachers reciprocate these benefits through enhanced affective commitment: emotional attachment to and identification with the school.

1.2.3 Affective Commitment as Mediating Mechanism

Affective commitment, as conceptualised by Meyer and Allen (1991, 1997), refers to employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation. Lux et al. (2023), in a rigorous two-wave study of 830 Australian professionals, demonstrated that affective organisational commitment mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and work engagement and job satisfaction. Ribeiro et al. (2018), using mediation analysis with 212 Portuguese employees, found that affective commitment mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and individual performance. Collectively, these studies establish affective commitment as the primary psychological mechanism through which authentic leadership exerts its influence, yet neither study examined organisational effectiveness as a school-level outcome in a developing-country context. The present study extends this mediation model to organisational effectiveness as a school-level outcome.

1.2.4 Authentic Leadership and Organisational Effectiveness in Educational Contexts

Organisational effectiveness in schools is a multidimensional construct encompassing student academic achievement, stakeholder satisfaction, resource management, and positive school climate (Cameron & Whetten, 1983; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983). Feng (2017), in a study of 1,009 Taiwanese teachers, found that authentic leadership had a direct effect of 0.76 on leader-member exchange. Nawaz and Laij (2021), examining 17 private universities in Jakarta, found that authentic leadership enhances organisational effectiveness by cultivating organisational virtuousness. More recently, Msila and Setlhako (2023) demonstrated that authentic leadership behaviours in South African schools significantly predicted school climate quality, which is an antecedent of organisational effectiveness. Emerging evidence suggests that the direct relationship between job satisfaction and organisational effectiveness

may be substantially mediated by deeper motivational constructs in the presence of authentic leadership (Lux et al., 2023; Wartenberg et al., 2023).

1.2.5 Research Gap

Three critical gaps remain in the literature. First, no known study has simultaneously examined affective commitment as a mediator for both organisational effectiveness and job satisfaction within the same school-level structural model. Second, few empirical studies appear to have tested a comprehensive mediation model of this kind in Sub-Saharan African secondary schools, where the available evidence remains limited (Gardner et al., 2024; Dedzo et al., 2026). Third, the relationship between job satisfaction and organisational effectiveness in the presence of authentic leadership and affective commitment has not been directly tested. The present study addresses all three gaps by employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design in Western Province, Zambia, a context whose geographic isolation, resource scarcity, and Lozi cultural frameworks offer a theoretically generative site for testing the boundary conditions of authentic leadership theory. The link between this cultural setting and the mediation model is direct: Lozi paternalistic and communal norms shape the teacher-principal relationship that the model treats as central. Where the Headteacher is experienced as a trusted, protective authority figure, teachers' emotional attachment to the school may be heightened, suggesting that affective commitment, rather than job satisfaction, could be the more culturally salient pathway through which authentic leadership translates into school effectiveness in this context.

2 Method

2.1 Research Design and Paradigm

A pragmatic paradigm informed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data were collected and analysed first to test the hypothesised structural model, followed by qualitative data collection to explain and contextualise the quantitative findings. Quantitative analyses were accorded primacy in answering the research hypotheses; qualitative findings served interpretive and confirmatory functions (Plano Clark, 2011; Creswell, 2015).

2.2 Setting, Population, and Sample

Western Province, Zambia, was selected as the study context due to its unique combination of geographic isolation, resource scarcity, and cultural distinctiveness (Ministry of Education, 2022). The study was conducted across five districts: Sikongo, Kalabo, Kaoma, Mongu, and Senanga. The target population comprised 2,896 secondary school teachers. Using Yamane's (1967) formula with a 4.63% margin of error, a required sample of 402 was calculated. Of 450 questionnaires distributed, 402 were returned and deemed usable, yielding a response rate of 89.3%. Teachers were selected using a proportionate stratified random sampling procedure. The five districts served as strata, and the required sample was allocated to each district in proportion to its share of the 2,896-teacher population, so that larger districts contributed more respondents. Within each district, schools were selected to reflect the range of school types and locations (urban, peri-urban, and rural), and within each selected school individual teachers were drawn by simple random sampling from staff lists provided by the Headteacher. This multi-stage procedure was intended to ensure that the 402 participating teachers were broadly representative of the provincial teaching workforce across districts, school types, and settings. For the qualitative phase, 20 Headteachers were purposively selected from the same schools using the following criteria: (a) minimum five years of experience in the current headship role, (b) representation across all five sampled districts to ensure geographic diversity, (c) schools with varying levels of organisational effectiveness

scores as indicated by the quantitative phase results, and (d) willingness to participate in a recorded semi-structured interview. These criteria ensured that participants possessed substantive leadership experience and represented the contextual diversity of the study setting.

2.3 Measures

Authentic leadership was measured using 8 items adapted from the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ; Walumbwa et al., 2008) on a 5-point Likert scale. Affective commitment was measured using 6 items adapted from Meyer and Allen's (1997) Organisational Commitment Scale. Job satisfaction was measured using 5 items from the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) short form (Weiss et al., 1967). Organisational effectiveness was measured using 7 items adapted from the Survey of Organisational Effectiveness (Pettaway et al., 2015). Cronbach's alpha confirmed excellent internal consistency: Authentic Leadership ($\alpha = 0.892$), Affective Commitment ($\alpha = 0.878$), Job Satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.851$), and Organisational Effectiveness ($\alpha = 0.906$). All four instruments were adapted for the Zambian secondary-school context through a structured process. Item wording was first reviewed to replace generic organisational terminology with school-appropriate referents (for example, "organisation" was rendered as "school" and "supervisor" as "Headteacher"). The adapted items were then reviewed for content and face validity by a panel of three experts comprising an educational-leadership academic and two experienced district education officers, and minor wording revisions were made on the basis of their feedback. The revised instruments were piloted with 30 teachers drawn from schools that did not form part of the main sample; pilot data were used to check item clarity and internal consistency, and no substantive item revisions were required. This adaptation and piloting process supported the contextual appropriateness and reliability of the measures prior to full data collection.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS v.26 and AMOS v.27. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted prior to structural model testing to assess measurement model validity (Kline, 2016). Model fit was evaluated using CFI, TLI (threshold ≥ 0.90), RMSEA (threshold < 0.08), and SRMR (threshold < 0.08). Mediation was tested using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) to generate 95% confidence intervals for indirect effects. Qualitative interview data were analysed thematically using NVivo 14, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, with trustworthiness ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis. Given the high observed association between authentic leadership and affective commitment, discriminant validity was examined using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) against the criteria recommended by Henseler et al. (2015), complemented by a chi-square difference test comparing the hypothesised model with a constrained one-factor alternative. The potential for common method bias, arising from the use of a single self-report instrument, was additionally assessed using Harman's single-factor test (Harman, 1967; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

2.5 Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected sequentially. In the quantitative phase, printed questionnaires were distributed to sampled teachers at their schools through the respective Headteachers, accompanied by a covering letter explaining the purpose of the study and assuring confidentiality. Teachers completed the questionnaires in their own time and returned them in sealed envelopes to a designated collection point at each school, from which the research team retrieved them; this procedure yielded the 402 usable returns reported above. In the subsequent qualitative phase, the 20 selected Headteachers

participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted at their schools by the lead researcher. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, followed an interview guide derived from the quantitative findings, and was audio-recorded with the participant's permission. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were returned to participants for member checking before analysis.

2.6 Mixed-Methods Integration

Integration of the quantitative and qualitative strands followed the logic of the sequential explanatory design and occurred at two explicit points. First, at the sampling interface, the quantitative results were used to purposively select interview participants, including schools with varying organisational-effectiveness scores, so that the qualitative phase could probe the patterns identified statistically. Second, at the interpretation stage, the qualitative themes were mapped onto specific quantitative findings so that each theme served to explain a particular statistical result, for example, the exceptionally high authentic leadership-affective commitment path and the non-significant job-satisfaction path. Integration was therefore achieved primarily through a connecting-and-explaining strategy and is reported through a narrative weaving of the two data sets in the Results and Discussion, supported by a joint display in which the four themes are aligned with the results they contextualise.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee, and permission to conduct the research in schools was granted by the Provincial Education Office and the participating District Education Boards. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all teachers and Headteachers prior to data collection, including separate consent for the audio-recording of interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected by removing identifying information from questionnaires and transcripts, assigning codes in place of names, storing data securely with access restricted to the research team, and reporting findings only in aggregate or de-identified form. No incentives were offered, and the study posed minimal risk to participants.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Result

3.1.1 Measurement Model

CFA confirmed that the four-factor measurement model demonstrated excellent fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.34$; CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.042; SRMR = 0.031. All factor loadings exceeded the 0.70 threshold (Kline, 2016), ranging from 0.72 to 0.88. All original items were retained; no items were removed or substantially modified during CFA, as all standardised factor loadings met the minimum threshold and modification indices did not indicate theoretically justifiable respecification. Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.86 to 0.93 and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) from 0.65 to 0.75, establishing convergent validity. A notably high inter-construct correlation between Authentic Leadership and Affective Commitment ($r = 0.96$) warrants careful interpretation and represents a substantive discriminant validity concern. Although this correlation indicates a degree of conceptual overlap between the two constructs in this context, its substantive interpretation is taken up in the Discussion (Section 5.1). The HTMT ratio of 0.88 fell within borderline-acceptable limits, and a chi-square difference test confirmed the two-factor solution provided significantly superior fit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 743.37$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). This HTMT value exceeds the conservative 0.85 threshold but remains below the more lenient 0.90 criterion advanced by Henseler et al. (2015), and the superior fit of the two-factor model indicates that the constructs are empirically separable. To

rule out an artefactual explanation for the strong associations, Harman's single-factor test was conducted; the first unrotated factor accounted for less than half of the total variance, below the 50% threshold, suggesting that common method bias was unlikely to have substantially distorted the observed relationships (Harman, 1967; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Authentic leadership and affective commitment were therefore retained as distinct but closely related constructs, and the magnitude of their correlation is interpreted substantively, rather than dismissed as measurement overlap, in Section 5.1.

3.1.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Authentic Leadership	3.43	0.81	—			
2. Affective Commitment	3.46	0.80	.96**	—		
3. Job Satisfaction	3.39	0.83	.61**	.64**	—	
4. Org. Effectiveness	3.25	0.86	.78**	.77**	.50**	—

Note. N = 402. ** p < .01. The high AL-AC correlation (r = .96) was subject to discriminant validity testing (see Section 4.1).

3.1.3 Structural Equation Model Results

The structural model demonstrated an excellent fit (CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.042; SRMR = 0.031). These fit indices were evaluated for the structural model separately from the measurement model, confirming that the structural constraints did not substantially degrade overall model fit. The model explained 93% of the variance in affective commitment ($R^2 = 0.93$), 37% in job satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.37$), and 61% in organisational effectiveness ($R^2 = 0.61$). Table 2 presents the path coefficients and hypothesis testing results. Figure 1 displays the final structural model, distinguishing the significant paths from the non-significant job satisfaction-effectiveness path.

Beyond statistical significance, the magnitude of the path coefficients is substantial. Following Cohen's (1988) conventions for interpreting standardised effects, authentic leadership's effect on affective commitment ($\beta = 0.963$) and on organisational effectiveness ($\beta = 0.433$) can both be interpreted as large, indicating that these relationships carry meaningful practical, and not merely statistical, significance for school leadership and improvement.

Table 2. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

H	Path	β	SE	t	p	Decision
H1	AL → Organisational Effectiveness	0.433	0.052	8.33	< .001	Supported
H2	Job Satisfaction → Org. Effectiveness	0.009	0.041	0.22	.825	Rejected
H3	AL → Affective Commitment (path a)	0.963	0.018	53.50	< .001	Supported
—	AC → Org. Effectiveness (path b)	0.349	0.067	5.21	.004	Supported
—	AL → Job Satisfaction	0.610	0.041	14.88	< .001	Supported

Note. AL = Authentic Leadership; AC = Affective Commitment. Standardised coefficients reported. N = 402. The rejection of H2 (job satisfaction → organisational effectiveness: $\beta = 0.009$, $p = .825$) is interpreted in Section 5.2.

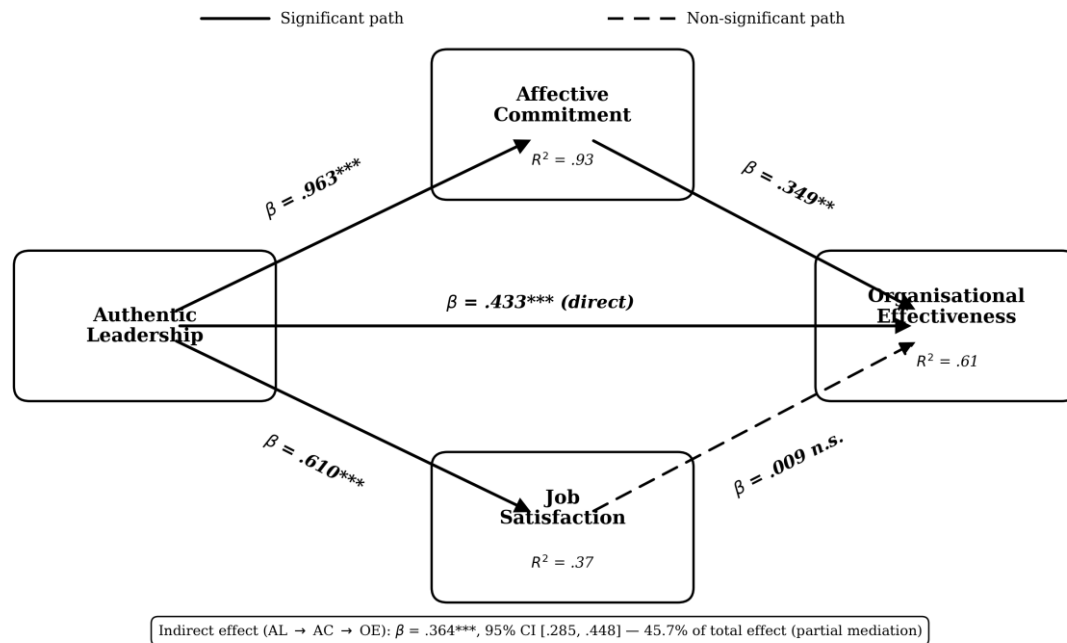


Figure 1. Final structural model showing standardised path coefficients. Solid arrows denote significant paths; the dashed arrow denotes the non-significant job satisfaction → organisational effectiveness path. AL = Authentic Leadership; AC = Affective Commitment; JS = Job Satisfaction; OE = Organisational Effectiveness. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; n.s. = not significant. The figure is rendered in greyscale line art for print reproduction; path significance is encoded by line style (solid = significant; dashed = non-significant) rather than colour, and standardised coefficients with their significance markers are reported on each path.

3.1.4 Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapped mediation analysis (5,000 resamples) confirmed that affective commitment significantly mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and organisational effectiveness (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). These results confirm partial mediation: authentic leadership exerts both a significant indirect effect on organisational effectiveness through affective commitment (indirect $\beta = 0.364$, 95% CI [0.285, 0.448]) and a significant direct effect (direct $\beta = 0.433$, 95% CI [0.331, 0.535]), indicating that affective commitment partially, rather than fully, accounts for the leadership–effectiveness relationship. Table 3 presents the mediation results.

Table 3. Bootstrapped Mediation Results (N = 402; 5,000 Bootstrap Resamples)

Path	Estimate	SE	95% CI	p	% Total	Conclusion
Indirect: AL → AC → OE	0.364	0.042	[.285, .448]	< .001	45.7%	Significant
Direct: AL → OE	0.433	0.052	[.331, .535]	< .001	54.3%	Significant
Total: AL → OE	0.797	0.031	[.736, .858]	< .001	100%	Significant
Indirect: AL → JS → OE	0.005	0.006	[−.002, .019]	.245	< 1%	Non-significant

Note. AL = Authentic Leadership; AC = Affective Commitment; JS = Job Satisfaction; OE = Organisational Effectiveness. CI = 95% Bias-corrected Bootstrap Confidence Interval.

3.1.5 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of 20 Headteacher interviews generated four primary themes. Throughout this section, interview participants are identified by anonymised codes (H01–H20), and representative excerpts are reported for each theme. These themes served an explanatory function within the sequential mixed-methods design, each contextualising a specific quantitative result.

Theme 1: The Transparency Paradox. Culturally rooted protective non-disclosure, informed by Lozi paternalistic leadership values, systematically constrained authentic transparency. This theme contextualises the boundary condition on the self-awareness and relational transparency dimensions of authentic leadership identified in the quantitative model. As one Headteacher explained: 'If I tell the teachers everything about the school's financial problems, they will worry and lose focus. A father does not burden his children with problems they cannot solve.' This protective non-disclosure is consistent with Dedzo et al.'s (2026) findings in Ghana and explains why the relational transparency dimension may operate differently in Lozi cultural contexts than Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) universal model assumes. A further excerpt illustrates this protective stance: 'Being open does not mean telling teachers every problem. It means they know my values and that I will never deceive them' (H12).

Theme 2: Cultural Paternalism: The Father Figure Archetype. Headteachers described their leadership role through the metaphor of a protective father, consistent with Dedzo et al.'s (2026) collective orientation dimension. This theme directly contextualises the exceptionally high authentic leadership–affective commitment path coefficient ($\beta = 0.963$): in contexts where the principal is experienced as a protective authority figure, teacher identification with the school becomes almost inseparable from identification with the principal, amplifying affective commitment. As one participant noted: 'My teachers follow me because they trust me as a father. They work hard not for the government, but for me, for this school family.' Another Headteacher captured the same archetype: 'In our community, a school leader is like a parent. When teachers see that you protect and guide them, they give the school their whole heart' (H05).

Theme 3: The Commitment Gap. Headteachers reported difficulty cultivating affective commitment beyond transactional presence, with spirituality and vocational calling emerging as supplementary commitment sources. This theme explains the residual variance in organisational effectiveness not accounted for by the structural model ($R^2 = 0.61$), suggesting that intrinsic motivational sources such as religious vocation and community duty constitute contextually specific commitment pathways not captured by Meyer and Allen's (1997) scale in its current form. This vocational dimension was echoed by a participant who observed: 'Some teachers stay because of their calling and their faith, not because of conditions of service. That commitment is something a salary cannot buy' (H09).

Theme 4: Competing Conceptions of Effectiveness. A misalignment emerged between headteachers' emphasis on examination results and teachers' valuation of relational quality and professional recognition (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983). This theme contextualises the partial mediation finding: the direct effect of authentic leadership on organisational effectiveness ($\beta = 0.433$) may operate through relational and climate mechanisms that headteachers value, while the affective commitment pathway (indirect $\beta = 0.364$) operates through teachers' sense of belonging and vocational identity, reflecting two distinct pathways to a construct that is itself multidimensionally understood. The divergence in how effectiveness was understood is reflected in one Headteacher's remark: 'The district measures

us by examination results, but my teachers feel valued when they are respected and recognised, not only when the pass rate rises' (H17).

3.2 Discussion

The Heart-First Model of School Effectiveness

The central finding of this study, that authentic leadership influences organisational effectiveness primarily through affective commitment and accounts for 46% of the total effect, supports what we tentatively propose, on the basis of this single study, as a 'heart-first' model of school effectiveness, a proposed model emerging from these findings rather than an established theory. This model proposes that in resource-constrained African school contexts, the principal pathway to organisational effectiveness operates through teachers' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the school (affective commitment), rather than through cognitive evaluations of working conditions (job satisfaction). The model builds on and extends the serial mediation model proposed by Lux et al. (2023) to organisational effectiveness as a school-level outcome.

The extraordinary strength of the authentic leadership–affective commitment path ($\beta = 0.963$) substantially exceeds values reported in Western samples and warrants cautious interpretation. Rather than treating this coefficient as straightforwardly reflecting a causal relationship, it is more prudent to interpret it as reflecting contextual amplification: in environments where extrinsic rewards are scarce, the quality of the teacher–principal relationship becomes the primary source of psychological resources available to teachers (Hobfoll et al., 2018), such that authentic leadership and affective commitment become experientially and psychometrically difficult to distinguish. This interpretation is supported by the qualitative Theme 2 findings (Cultural Paternalism), in which teachers described their commitment as inseparable from their trust in the Headteacher as a paternal figure. This finding advances authentic leadership theory by reframing the mechanism of authentic leadership influence from a primarily cognitive process to a fundamentally affective one, consistent with Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

These findings are broadly consistent with the wider empirical literature on authentic leadership in organisational and school settings, while extending it to a new outcome and context. The mediating role of affective commitment observed here echoes Ribeiro et al.'s (2018) finding that affective commitment mediates the authentic leadership–performance relationship among Portuguese employees, and Lux et al.'s (2023) two-wave evidence linking authentic leadership to commitment and work-related outcomes among Australian professionals. The direct authentic leadership–effectiveness effect is also in keeping with school-based studies reporting that authentic leadership shapes climate and effectiveness-related outcomes (Feng, 2017; Nawaz & Laij, 2021; Msila & Setlhako, 2023). The present study contributes to this body of work by testing affective commitment and job satisfaction as competing mediators of organisational effectiveness within a single school-level model and in a Sub-Saharan African context that remains comparatively under-represented in this empirical literature. More recent school-based evidence reinforces the affective pathway emphasised here: Xu and Pang (2024) found that principals' authentic leadership predicted teachers' organisational commitment partly through teacher well-being in Chinese primary schools, Shao et al. (2025) reported positive effects of authentic leadership on teacher work engagement via school climate and efficacy, and Alzoraiki et al. (2023) and Bogler and Berkovich (2022) underscore the close link between teacher commitment and school-level performance, while Kandemir (2024) similarly positions school effectiveness as a mediating mechanism in leadership models.

The Non-Effect of Job Satisfaction

The rejection of H2 (job satisfaction $\rightarrow$ organisational effectiveness: $\beta = 0.009$, $p = .825$) is theoretically significant. While job satisfaction correlated moderately with organisational effectiveness at the bivariate level ($r = 0.50$, $p < .01$), this relationship was substantially reduced in the multivariate structural model, suggesting that it appears to be substantially accounted for by authentic leadership and affective commitment rather than representing an independent direct effect. This finding invites a degree of caution regarding policy frameworks grounded in Herzberg et al.'s (1959) motivator-hygiene theory that prioritise satisfaction-enhancement as the primary pathway to improved teacher performance. Within the limits of a cross-sectional design, the present data are consistent with the possibility that improving job satisfaction without also building affective commitment may enhance teacher well-being without producing a commensurate improvement in school performance. This interpretation should be treated as tentative: it does not imply that job satisfaction is unimportant, but rather that, in this context, its influence on effectiveness appears to operate largely through affective commitment and authentic leadership rather than independently.

Cultural Boundary Conditions of Authentic Leadership Theory

The transparency paradox highlights a cultural boundary condition of authentic leadership theory that appears to have received limited explicit theoretical attention to date. Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) model treats relational transparency as universally beneficial. The Lozi cultural context studied here challenges this universalist assumption: protective non-disclosure is experienced by leaders as authentic moral responsibility and by the cultural community as appropriate stewardship. This is powerfully illustrated by the qualitative evidence: as one Headteacher stated, 'Transparency in our culture does not mean sharing everything it means being honest about who you are as a leader, not about every problem the school faces.' This culturally embedded understanding of transparency aligns with Confucian notions of protective authority identified by House et al. (2014) in GLOBE research. This raises the possibility, requiring confirmation in further research, that the transparency paradox identified here may extend to other collectivist cultural contexts; the present single-context evidence, however, cannot by itself establish such broader applicability. This finding aligns with and extends Dedzo et al.'s (2026) identification of collective orientation as a culturally specific dimension of authentic leadership in West African contexts, suggesting the need for a culturally adaptive extension of authentic leadership theory.

4 Conclusions and Implications

Theoretical Contributions

This study set out to test whether affective commitment mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and organisational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Western Province, Zambia. The central finding that affective commitment partially mediates this relationship, accounting for 46% of the total effect, supports the 'heart-first' model proposed here: the proposition that in resource-constrained African school contexts, teacher emotional attachment to the school is the primary mechanism through which authentic principal leadership translates into organisational performance.

This study makes four primary theoretical contributions. First, it provides a mixed-methods empirical examination of the mechanisms of authentic leadership in Sub-Saharan African secondary schools, demonstrating both the generalisability and cultural boundary conditions of the theory (Dedzo et al., 2026; Gardner et al., 2024). This contribution is best understood as analytic, rather than statistical, generalisation: the model and its boundary conditions are offered as theoretically transferable propositions grounded in a single

provincial context, and their wider applicability remains to be confirmed through replication in other settings. Second, it supports a 'heart-first' model of school effectiveness, extending Lux et al.'s (2023) and Ribeiro et al.'s (2018) mediation frameworks to educational organisational effectiveness. Third, it provides evidence that the direct effect of job satisfaction on organisational effectiveness appears substantially accounted for by authentic leadership and affective commitment in the presence of both constructs in the model, challenging prevailing motivational models (Herzberg et al., 1959; Locke, 1976). Fourth, it identifies cultural paternalism, specifically the Lozi father-figure archetype of headship, as a context-specific boundary condition that shapes how the transparency dimension of authentic leadership is expressed and received, with direct implications for how principal development programmes in similar contexts should conceptualise and teach authentic transparency.

Practical and Policy Implications

For educational policymakers and leadership developers in Zambia and comparable Sub-Saharan African contexts, the findings support the following recommendations. First, principal preparation programmes should incorporate authentic leadership development as a core module, with culturally adapted guidance on practising transparency within Lozi cultural frameworks specifically, distinguishing between relational transparency (sharing one's values, reasoning, and moral commitments) and situational disclosure (sharing all institutional problems), the latter of which may be appropriately moderated by cultural paternalistic norms. Practical tools such as structured reflective journaling, peer coaching dyads, and 360-degree feedback instruments adapted for collectivist cultural norms should be piloted within provincial teacher education centres. Because affective commitment was the dominant mechanism linking leadership to effectiveness, these measures may also have value for teacher retention: strengthening teachers' emotional attachment to the school, rather than relying on satisfaction with conditions of service alone, is a plausible lever for reducing the high attrition that characterises the provincial workforce, although this proposition would need to be confirmed in studies that measure retention directly.

Second, the Ministry of Education should develop school effectiveness frameworks that extend beyond examination results to include relational and affective indicators such as teacher sense of belonging, affective commitment survey scores, and school climate assessments alongside academic performance metrics (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983). These affective indicators should be incorporated into school self-evaluation tools and district supervision checklists. This recommendation follows directly from the finding that affective commitment, rather than job satisfaction, carried the mediated pathway to effectiveness (indirect $\beta = 0.364$); it is intended to broaden the evidence base used in school evaluation rather than to prescribe a fixed set of indicators, the precise composition and weighting of which would require validation within the Zambian monitoring framework before adoption.

Third, district education offices should provide structured reflective supervision for Headteachers to support the development of self-awareness, the foundational dimension of Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) authentic leadership model, with particular attention to how Headteachers' personal values and cultural identity shape their leadership behaviours. Monthly peer supervision circles facilitated by district school inspectors represent a low-cost, culturally appropriate mechanism for sustaining this reflective practice. It should be emphasised that the specific implementation tools suggested above, such as reflective journaling, peer coaching dyads, and adapted 360-degree feedback, are illustrative recommendations consistent with the findings rather than interventions directly tested in this study; their effectiveness would need to be evaluated empirically before wide-scale adoption.

Table 4. Summary of Key Findings and Corresponding Policy Actions

Finding			Policy Action
Authentic leadership	organisational effectiveness	predicts	Embed authentic leadership development modules in principal preparation programmes
Affective leadership outcomes	commitment	mediates	Introduce teacher engagement and belonging programmes that strengthen emotional attachment to the school
Job satisfaction shows no independent effect			Shift emphasis beyond material incentives toward commitment-building practices
Transparency paradox (cultural boundary condition)			Provide contextualised, culturally adapted leadership training that distinguishes relational transparency from situational disclosure

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs (Gardner et al., 2024). The reliance on self-report measures introduces potential common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), mitigated by Harman's (1967) test results (32.6% of variance in the first factor, well below the 50% threshold). Because Harman's single-factor test is a relatively insensitive diagnostic, future studies should incorporate stronger procedural and statistical remedies, such as marker-variable techniques and the temporal separation of predictor and criterion measurements, to further minimise common method variance. The high inter-construct correlation between authentic leadership and affective commitment ($r = .96$) represents an additional limitation, as it raises questions about whether the two constructs are genuinely discriminable in this context; future research should use multitrait-multimethod designs to test this. Although discriminant validity tests supported construct distinctiveness, the exceptionally high correlation between authentic leadership and affective commitment suggests possible conceptual proximity within the study context.

Future studies employing longitudinal and multi-source designs should further examine whether these constructs remain empirically distinct in resource-constrained educational settings. The near-exclusively male sample (80.6%) may not represent gender dynamics in other provinces, and the study's focus on Western Province limits geographical generalisability.

Future research should extend the investigation to other Zambian provinces, include student outcome measures, and examine gender as a moderator of authentic leadership effects. Taken together, these findings underscore that nurturing teachers' affective commitment, through authentic and culturally contextualized leadership development, offers a promising and humane pathway to strengthening school effectiveness in Western Province and comparable Sub-Saharan African settings.

In foregrounding the heart over the ledger, this study invites scholars and policymakers alike to reconsider what it truly means for a school to be led well: not merely managed efficiently, but bound together by the affective commitment that authentic leadership makes possible.

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

Kamizhi Mulambwa Ephraim contributed to the conception and design of the study, data collection, and drafted the initial manuscript; conducted the quantitative data analysis, refined the research methodology, and Clement Mwaanga co-authored the discussion sections; both authors collaboratively reviewed, revised, and finalised the manuscript for submission. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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