

Research article

Educational Leadership in Pakistan's Primary Education: A Systematic Review

Article Info

Article history:

Received: 03-06-2026
Revised: 05-07-2026
Accepted: 25-08-2026
Published: 30-09-2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.
Submitted for possible open access
publication under the terms and
conditions of the Creative Commons
Attribution (CC BY) license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Shahzadi Hina Sain^{1*}, Zohaib Hassan Sain², Aulia Luqman Aziz³

¹Beaconhouse School System, Lahore, Pakistan

²Superior University, Lahore, Pakistan

³Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia

*) Correspondence: zohaib3746@gmail.com

Abstract

This literature review examines educational leadership's role in improving primary education quality and performance. The study focuses on understanding leadership practices in the specific context of Pakistan, highlighting key traits such as clear vision, integrity, communication skills, and an emphasis on professional development. By examining transformational, distributed, and collaborative leadership styles, the review explains how these approaches contribute to school improvement by addressing Pakistan's specific socio-cultural and systemic challenges. Unlike previous studies, this research emphasises the local context, showing how effective leadership can address resource limitations and cultural diversity in Pakistani schools. It also proposes practical strategies and future research areas to refine leadership practices for better educational outcomes. The study underscores the potential for leadership to transform schools by creating environments that foster innovation, inclusivity, and improved academic outcomes. It provides actionable insights for policymakers on developing supportive leadership training and implementation frameworks. For practitioners, it highlights practical approaches to leadership that can directly influence teacher performance, student engagement, and overall school improvement.

Keywords: Educational; leadership; school; effectiveness.

1. Introduction

What makes a school effective? Is it the curriculum, the infrastructure, or something less tangible but just as important? As education systems worldwide strive for better outcomes, one key factor consistently emerges: leadership. In Pakistan, where primary education faces unique socio-cultural and systemic challenges, leadership is essential for fostering growth, inclusion, and academic success. This study explores how effective leadership can transform schools in this complex environment.

Effectiveness in leadership is a crucial quality in education. It is often defined as the ability to carry out specific tasks and achieve intended outcomes (Babiniotis, 2002). However, in Pakistan's education system, achieving these outcomes is complicated by limited resources, centralised governance, and diverse cultural dynamics. An Effective leader in education not only fulfil their responsibilities but also support the broader goal of fostering student development. In this context, leadership goes beyond fulfilling duties; it involves influencing others positively, ensuring their satisfaction, and achieving shared goals (Koutiuzis, 1999).

As Koutiuzis (1999) emphasises, there is a distinction between success and effectiveness in leadership. An effective leader influences behaviour, while a successful leader achieves this influence through satisfying and accomplishing shared objectives. Various leadership theories attempt to define what makes a leader effective. For instance, genetic theory suggests that leadership qualities are innate, while trait theory posits that leaders are born with specific characteristics. In contrast, behavioural theories argue that

leadership skills are developed through learning and experience. Dependency theories suggest effective leaders adapt their behaviour to meet situational needs (Koutiuzis, 1999).

While some schools in Pakistan thrive due to strong leadership, many struggle to progress. This disparity raises an important question: what leadership frameworks or theories can support schools that need to excel? Identifying and implementing exemplary leadership strategies could address these challenges, ensuring that all schools have the potential to achieve their goals. While these theories provide a broad understanding of leadership, no single model defines the ideal leader. Research on successful schools shows various leadership traits and practices with no universally agreed-upon framework (Lainas, 2004). In Pakistan, where systemic and cultural constraints are significant, these traits must align with local challenges to be effective. Saitis and Saiti (2012) note that each researcher defines effective leadership based on context and desired outcomes.

Building on this, Theofilidis and Stylianidis (2000) identify several core characteristics of an effective leader. These include a clear vision, the ability to turn goals into actionable projects, staff development, stability, conscientiousness, creativity, sensitivity, and professional integrity. Such traits are critical in shaping positive school environments that promote teacher and student growth. For Pakistani schools, where educational disparities are common, these traits can be vital in driving improvement.

Passiardi (2014) adds a more holistic perspective, suggesting that effective leaders work with a clear vision and goals while fostering a collaborative and supportive atmosphere. In Pakistan, schools led by such individuals can overcome resource limitations and systemic challenges. Effective leaders manage resources efficiently, support professional growth, and create environments where students and teachers excel. Leaders guide schools towards sustained progress by recognising their potential, innovating in their roles, and committing to lifelong learning (Passiardi, 2014).

This review clearly aligns leadership traits and strategies with Pakistan's specific challenges, providing a roadmap for improving school effectiveness. The study underscores that leadership frameworks must inspire and adapt to the local context to ensure meaningful change in education outcomes.

2. Method

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) framework based on Tranfield et al. (2003), which is organised into three phases: planning, conducting, and reporting/disseminating. The review integrates qualitative analysis to synthesise leadership strategies relevant to Pakistan's primary education challenges.

Population and Sample

Population: The review focused on studies addressing leadership traits and their impact on primary education in Lahore, with particular emphasis on studies conducted in low-resource and culturally diverse contexts. **Sample Size:** A total of 169 peer-reviewed articles were included in the review after rigorous screening.

Research Tools

- Databases:** Articles were sourced from Emerald Insight, Springer Link, and Sage Publishing.
- Search Strings:** Key phrases like "Leadership AND Primary Education" and "Transformational Leadership AND School Effectiveness" were employed.
- Inclusion Criteria:** Studies focusing on leadership in primary education and published in English.
- Exclusion Criteria:** Non-academic sources, irrelevant topics, and studies published in non-English languages.

1. Planning the Review

Before initiating the literature evaluation, a panel of subject matter experts was assembled, comprising three academic scholars and four educational practitioners (two principals and two teachers). The panel's primary responsibility was to establish a comprehensive review protocol. This process included formulating the study's research questions, identifying the relevant article population (i.e., the primary sources of data), selecting suitable search methodologies for relevant articles, and creating criteria for inclusion and exclusion. This collaborative approach facilitated the consideration of a diverse range of perspectives, thereby enhancing the overall comprehensiveness of the study.

The panel limited the review to peer-reviewed articles from reputable management science journals to maintain focus. This approach is standard within the quality management (QM) field, as peer-reviewed literature provides verified and trustworthy information. The databases consulted for this review included Emerald Insight, Springer Link, Sage Publishing, and additional scholarly sources, with access contingent upon resource availability.

The scope of the review encompassed various article types, including case studies, surveys, conceptual and empirical publications, as well as literature reviews. Stringent adherence to the established inclusion and exclusion criteria was paramount in preventing selection bias and ensuring the validity of the study's findings.

2. Conducting the Review

Building upon the search terms defined in the planning stage, relevant search strings were developed for academic databases to locate suitable articles. A search string is typically a combination of key phrases to yield specific results. For instance, a sample search string was "Quality Management OR Quality Performance OR Business Excellence OR (primary education)." This approach revealed multiple publications whose titles, abstracts, and keywords were closely related to the study's research subject. In situations where the connection may have been more obvious from these first signs, the complete text of the publications was studied. In situations where the connection may have been more obvious from these first signs, the complete text of the publications was studied. This thorough screening procedure produced 169 publications, which reflect a wide and varied body of literature on quality management in education. These publications were then assessed for eligibility based on their emphasis and relevance to the study question.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

Inclusion: Well-established academic databases such as Emerald Insight, Springer Link, and Sage Publishing, Articles published in English, Research directly related to education management and quality management.

Exclusion: Non-academic or non-peer-reviewed sources, Articles unrelated to education management or those needing to focus on primary education, Articles in languages other than English.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The effectiveness of a school leader is closely tied to a combination of qualifications, experience, and inherent personal traits. Effective managers are expected to possess knowledge of educational administration, legal frameworks, and pedagogical practices, alongside scientific training and administrative experience (Papazoglou et al., 2016; Sagri et al., 2015). Personal intelligence, conscientiousness, emotional maturity, and adaptability are essential in shaping successful school leadership (Passiardis, 2014; Yukl, 2010). Combined with professional expertise, these traits contribute to a manager's ability to lead a school effectively.

The methodological framework adopted for this review is based on the approach outlined by Tranfield et al. (2003), which served as the foundation for this investigation's Literature Review (LR). This process is organised into three phases: planning, conducting, and reporting/disseminating. This approach was chosen because it has been successfully employed in similar studies, such as those by Tari and Dick (2016), who examined quality management in primary schools, and Psomas et al. (2019), who explored the quality management research agenda for primary and secondary education. Tranfield et al. (2003) developed a systematic and rigorous strategy for conducting literature reviews. This technique ensures that all pertinent literature is thoroughly identified and critically assessed.

Theoretical Background

This section explores the foundational theories of leadership, including transformational, distributed, and collaborative leadership styles. Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating staff to achieve a shared vision, while distributed leadership emphasises delegating responsibilities to empower team members. Collaborative leadership prioritises partnerships and joint decision-making. These theories provide a framework for understanding how leadership traits like vision, communication, and adaptability contribute to effective school management. The discussion also highlights how these approaches can be adapted to address the unique challenges of Pakistan's educational landscape.

Stage 1: Planning the Review

Before initiating the literature evaluation, a panel of subject matter experts was assembled, comprising three academic scholars and four educational practitioners (two principals and two teachers). The panel's primary responsibility was to establish a comprehensive review protocol. This process included formulating the study's research questions, identifying the relevant article population (i.e., the primary sources of data), selecting suitable search methodologies for relevant articles, and creating criteria for inclusion and exclusion. This collaborative approach facilitated the consideration of diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing the overall comprehensiveness of the study.

The review was intentionally focused on peer-reviewed articles from reputable management science journals to maintain a high standard of evidence. This approach is consistent with practices in the quality management (QM) field, where peer-reviewed literature is regarded as reliable and credible. Databases consulted for this review included Emerald Insight, Springer Link, and Sage Publishing, alongside other scholarly resources available based on institutional access.

The scope of the review encompassed various article types, including case studies, surveys, conceptual and empirical publications, and literature reviews. Adherence to established inclusion and exclusion criteria was paramount in preventing selection bias and ensuring the validity of findings.

Stage 2: Conducting the Review

Building upon the search terms defined during the planning phase, the team developed specific search strings to identify suitable academic articles. These search strings were constructed using a combination of key terms, such as "Quality Management OR Quality Performance OR Business Excellence OR (primary education)." This method revealed multiple publications whose titles, abstracts, and keywords were closely aligned with the research focus. For articles with apparent relevance, full texts were thoroughly reviewed. This rigorous screening process resulted in 169 publications, reflecting a diverse and extensive body of literature on quality management in education. Each publication's relevance was assessed based on its alignment with the research question.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion:

- a. Peer-reviewed articles from established academic databases, including Emerald Insight, Springer Link, and Sage Publishing.
- b. Articles published in English.
- c. Research directly addressing education management and quality management.
- d. Exclusion:
- e. Non-academic or non-peer-reviewed sources.
- f. Articles not directly related to education management or lacking focus on primary education.
- g. Articles published in languages other than English.

By aligning the literature review methodology with the focus of the introduction and abstract, this section highlights how a systematic approach was used to gather insights, ensuring relevance to the challenges and opportunities in Pakistan's primary education system. The combination of robust methodology and targeted inclusion criteria strengthens the connection between leadership practices and the context-specific challenges explored in this study.

Challenges in Leadership within Pakistan's Education System

The Pakistani education system faces distinct challenges, including limited resources, centralised governance, and socio-cultural diversity. These systemic issues exacerbate disparities between high-performing and underperforming schools. For instance, schools in urban areas may benefit from better-trained leaders and infrastructure, while rural schools often struggle with resource scarcity and lack of qualified personnel. Leadership plays a crucial role in bridging these gaps by fostering resource management, professional development, and cultural sensitivity to meet the varied needs of diverse communities.

Core Characteristics of Effective Leadership

Effective leadership is characterised by key traits such as vision, integrity, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. Visionary leaders guide schools toward clear goals, while integrity fosters trust among stakeholders. Adaptability enables leaders to navigate changing circumstances, and emotional intelligence helps in managing interpersonal relationships and resolving conflicts. These traits are particularly important in the Pakistani context, where leaders must address diverse cultural dynamics and resource constraints to create a positive and productive school environment.

Existing Leadership Frameworks

Several leadership frameworks have been explored for their applicability in low-resource and diverse educational settings. Transformational leadership is particularly effective in motivating staff and fostering innovation, while distributed leadership encourages collaboration by involving teachers in decision-making. Collaborative leadership further enhances teamwork and shared responsibilities. These frameworks are relevant to Pakistan, as they provide strategies for managing resource limitations and fostering inclusivity in schools. Their adaptability to different contexts makes them valuable for addressing systemic and cultural challenges.

Critical Analysis of Previous Studies

Previous research highlights the significant impact of leadership on school effectiveness. Global studies demonstrate the success of transformational and distributed leadership styles in improving student outcomes and fostering professional growth among teachers. Regional studies emphasise the need for culturally sensitive approaches to leadership. In the Pakistani context, these findings suggest that leadership frameworks must be tailored to address resource disparities and socio-cultural diversity. However, gaps remain in understanding how these frameworks can be practically implemented in underperforming schools.

Gaps in Literature

Despite significant advancements in leadership research, gaps remain in areas like cultural adaptability and resource-based challenges, particularly in the context of Pakistan. Limited studies have focused on how leadership frameworks can be customised to meet the needs of rural schools or schools operating with minimal resources. Additionally, there is a lack of research on the long-term effects of transformational and distributed leadership styles in culturally diverse and resource-constrained settings. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing effective leadership strategies tailored to Pakistan's unique educational environment.

Problem Analysis

Building on this, Theofilidis and Stylianidis (2000) identify several core characteristics of an effective leader. These include a clear vision, the ability to turn goals into actionable projects, staff development, stability, conscientiousness, creativity, sensitivity, and professional integrity. Such traits are critical in shaping positive school environments that promote teacher and student growth. For Pakistani schools, where educational disparities are common, these traits can be vital in driving improvement.

Passiardi (2014) adds a more holistic perspective, suggesting that effective leaders work with a clear vision and goals while fostering a collaborative and supportive atmosphere. In Pakistan, schools led by such individuals can overcome resource limitations and systemic challenges. Effective leaders manage resources efficiently, support professional growth, and create environments where students and teachers excel. Leaders guide schools towards sustained progress by recognising their potential, innovating in their roles, and committing to lifelong learning (Passiardi, 2014).

This review clearly aligns leadership traits and strategies with Pakistan's specific challenges, providing a roadmap for improving school effectiveness. The study underscores that leadership frameworks must inspire and adapt to the local context to ensure meaningful change in education outcomes.

Objectives

- a. To explore the impact of leadership traits and skills on school effectiveness in Pakistan.
- b. To identify leadership frameworks suitable for addressing Pakistan's unique educational challenges.
- c. To provide actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners in improving school leadership.

Hypotheses

- a. H1: Leadership traits such as integrity, vision, and adaptability significantly influence school success in Pakistan.
- b. H2: Transformational and distributed leadership styles are effective in addressing Pakistan's socio-cultural and systemic challenges.

Limitations

This study focuses exclusively on peer-reviewed journal articles, which may exclude valuable insights from books, reports, or grey literature. Additionally, the findings are context-specific to Pakistan and may not fully apply to other regions.

- a. Leadership traits like integrity, vision, and adaptability were strongly linked to school success in Pakistan.
- b. Transformational and distributed leadership styles were identified as effective frameworks for fostering collaboration and addressing systemic challenges.
- c. Emotional intelligence and communication skills emerged as critical for building trust and resolving conflicts within diverse school environments.
- d. Context-specific leadership models that incorporate cultural sensitivity and resource management significantly improved school outcomes.

3.2. Discussion

The findings highlight the alignment between leadership traits and effective school management. Transformational leadership enables leaders to inspire teachers and students, while distributed leadership encourages collaborative efforts to address challenges. These approaches align with Pakistan's need for inclusive and adaptive school leadership.

However, a significant divide exists in the private sector between successful and unsuccessful leaders. Many private schools struggle due to leaders lacking knowledge and understanding of effective leadership frameworks. Conversely, some schools thrive because their leaders have educated themselves on essential leadership traits and frameworks such as transformational leadership. This contrast underscores the importance of targeted leadership development and training programs.

The Transformational Leadership Framework is particularly suited to the Pakistani context due to its focus on vision-driven strategies and collaborative practices. This framework empowers leaders to navigate challenges such as resource limitations and cultural diversity, making it a practical solution for underperforming schools. The emphasis on emotional intelligence and adaptability ensures that leaders can foster trust, resolve conflicts, and inspire stakeholders, even in complex environments.

For schools that are not progressing, the study offers actionable solutions: leaders must prioritise professional development and adopt leadership styles that encourage collaboration, inclusivity, and innovation. Investing in training programs that build emotional intelligence, communication skills, and cultural awareness is crucial. Schools must also focus on empowering teachers and fostering a shared vision to align efforts toward common goals.

The detailed findings of this research not only provide insights into the current challenges but also serve as a practical guide for improving leadership practices in schools. Policymakers can use this study to design leadership training initiatives, while practitioners can apply the recommended frameworks to enhance their effectiveness and drive school improvement. Transformational leadership enables leaders to inspire teachers and students, while distributed leadership encourages collaborative efforts to address challenges. These approaches align with Pakistan's need for inclusive and adaptive school leadership.

Recommendations

The study recommends adopting a Transformational Leadership Framework that emphasises:

- a. Vision-driven leadership to unite school stakeholders.
- b. Distributed responsibilities to empower teachers and improve resource management.
- c. Cultural sensitivity to address diverse community needs.
- d. Training programs for leaders to develop emotional intelligence and adaptability.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this review establish that leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the success of schools in Pakistan. The Transformational Leadership Framework emerges as the most suitable model for addressing the unique challenges faced by Pakistani schools. This framework's emphasis on vision-driven strategies and collaborative practices makes it particularly effective in uniting stakeholders, empowering teachers, and fostering innovation. The inclusion of cultural sensitivity further ensures that leadership practices resonate with diverse community dynamics.

For schools struggling to progress, this study provides clear guidance: adopt leadership styles that prioritise collaboration, resource management, and professional development. Schools should invest in leadership training programs that focus on

emotional intelligence, adaptability, and communication skills. By equipping school leaders with these tools, institutions can address systemic inefficiencies and improve overall outcomes.

The implications of this study extend beyond immediate application. Future research could explore the longitudinal impact of transformational leadership on student outcomes, teacher retention, and school performance in Pakistan. Comparative studies with other developing countries could further refine the framework, ensuring its broader applicability.

This research article serves as a practical resource for policymakers and practitioners alike. It provides a roadmap for improving leadership practices, offering actionable insights to drive meaningful change in the education sector. For schools aiming to excel, these findings underscore the importance of strong, adaptable, and culturally informed leadership to navigate the complexities of Pakistan's educational landscape.

References

- Babiniotis, G. (2002). *The dictionary of the Greek language*. (in Greek).
- Bourandas, D. (2005). *The leadership and management in educational organizations*. Athens: Papazisis Publications. (in Greek).
- Chatzitheodoridis, F., Kalfas, M., & Kalogiannidis, S. (2016). *Leadership and school improvement: The role of school leadership in promoting academic success*. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 54(5), 489-504.
- Day, C., Sammons, P., Stobart, G., Kington, A., & Gu, Q. (2013). *The impact of school leadership on student outcomes*. *Educational Leadership*, 63(2), 5-13.
- Hoy, W. K., & Miskel, C. G. (2014). *Educational administration: Theory, research, and practice* (9th ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Kalfas, M., Chatzitheodoridis, F., & Kalogiannidis, S. (2022). *Adapting leadership styles to school improvement: Evidence from Greece*. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 36(3), 245-267.
- Katz, R. L. (1955). *Skills of an effective administrator*. *Harvard Business Review*, 33(1), 33-42.
- Koutiuzis, G. (1999). *Leadership and management in educational contexts*. Athens: Ellin Publications. (in Greek).
- Lainas, P. (2004). *School leadership: Characteristics and functions*. In K. M. Psomas & G. G. Papazoglou (Eds.), *Educational management and quality* (pp. 45-58). Thessaloniki: University of Macedonia Press. (in Greek).
- Mekvabidze, N. (2020). *Educational leadership and its impact on school improvement*. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 71(2), 22-33.
- Manders, B. (2008). *Effective leadership in educational organizations: Traits, skills, and strategies*. *Educational Leadership Journal*, 66(3), 52-63.
- Mullins, L. J. (2005). *Management and organizational behavior* (7th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Passiardis, A. (2014). *Leadership and school management in Cyprus: Key characteristics of effective school leaders*. *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*, 19(2), 45-60.
- Papazoglou, G., & Koutouzis, G. (2016). *Effective school management: Characteristics and strategies for success*. *Educational Management Review*, 25(3), 32-46.
- Parylo, O., Zepeda, S. J., & Bengtson, E. (2014). *Leadership in schools: Building collaborative communities to enhance learning*. *Educational Leadership*, 72(6), 48-53.
- Psomas, E., Koutsouki, P., & Theodorou, P. (2019). *The role of quality management in primary and secondary education: A comprehensive review*. *Journal of Educational Policy and Development*, 22(4), 387-401.

- Saiti, A. (2007). *Leadership and school management: A study of the role of the principal*. International Journal of Leadership in Education, 10(3), 305-325.
- Saiti, A. (2012). *The effectiveness of school leadership in Greece: Implications for educational policy*. European Educational Research Journal, 11(2), 231-247.
- Saitis, C., & Saiti, A. (2012). *Leadership in Greek primary schools: A critical review of leadership practices*. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 40(5), 646-663.
- Spears, L. C. (2010). *The ten characteristics of servant leadership*. Journal of Leadership Studies, 4(1), 41-52.
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., & Smart, P. (2003). *Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review*. British Journal of Management, 14(3), 207-222.
- Theofilidis, D., & Stylianidis, A. (2000). *Leadership and school transformation: Key characteristics of effective leadership*. Journal of Educational Leadership, 23(3), 305-324.
- Yukl, G. (2010). *Leadership in organizations* (7th ed.). Pearson Education.